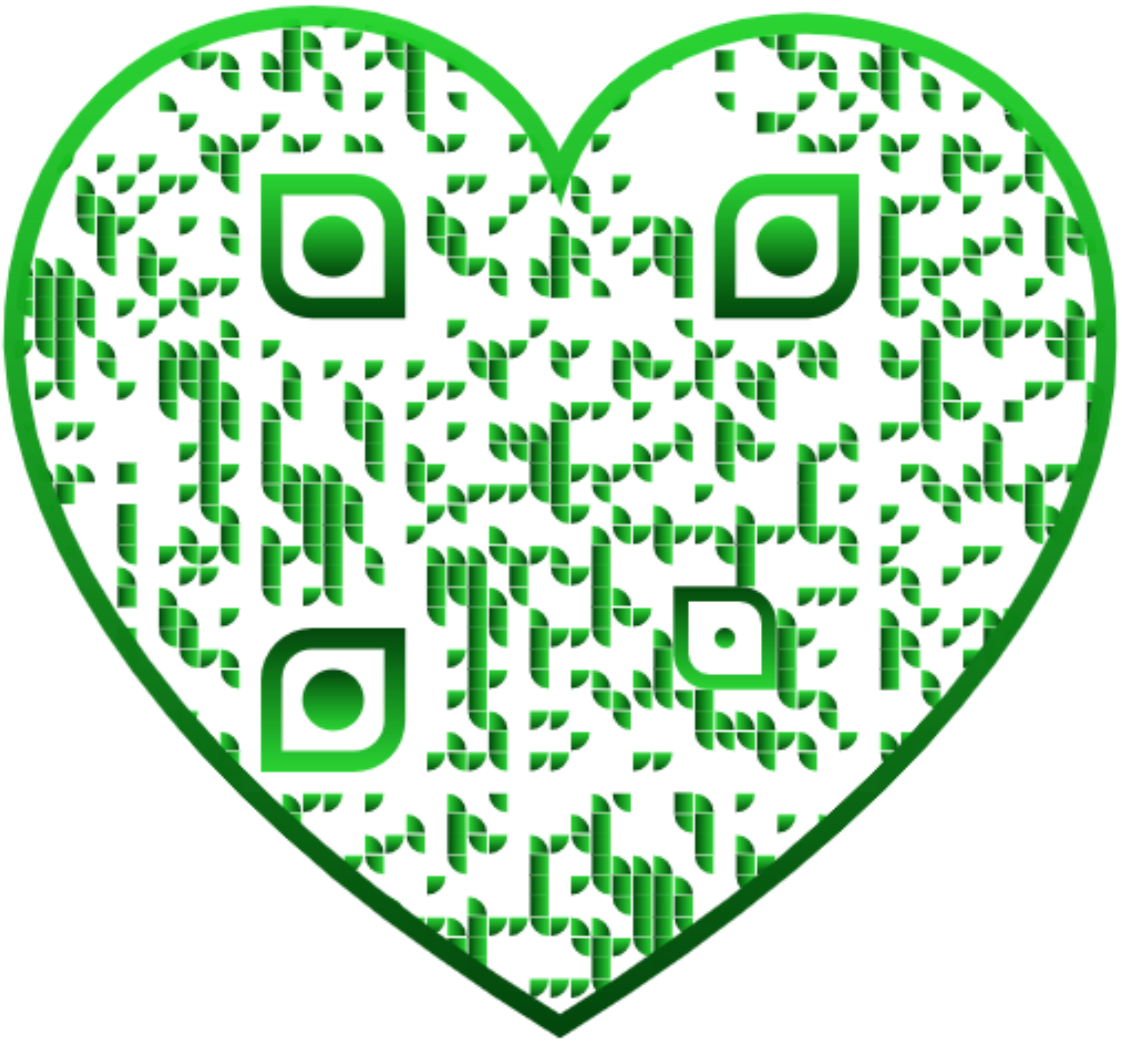
Rolling Stone
SEPTEMBER 2023
ISSUE 1379

FEARLESS AND FREE

KAROL G



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'ALL THE NEWS THAT FITS'

"I thought, 'My mother, as appalled as she will be that I have a neck tattoo, will love that I have my manners in clear, full view.'"

ETHEL CAIN

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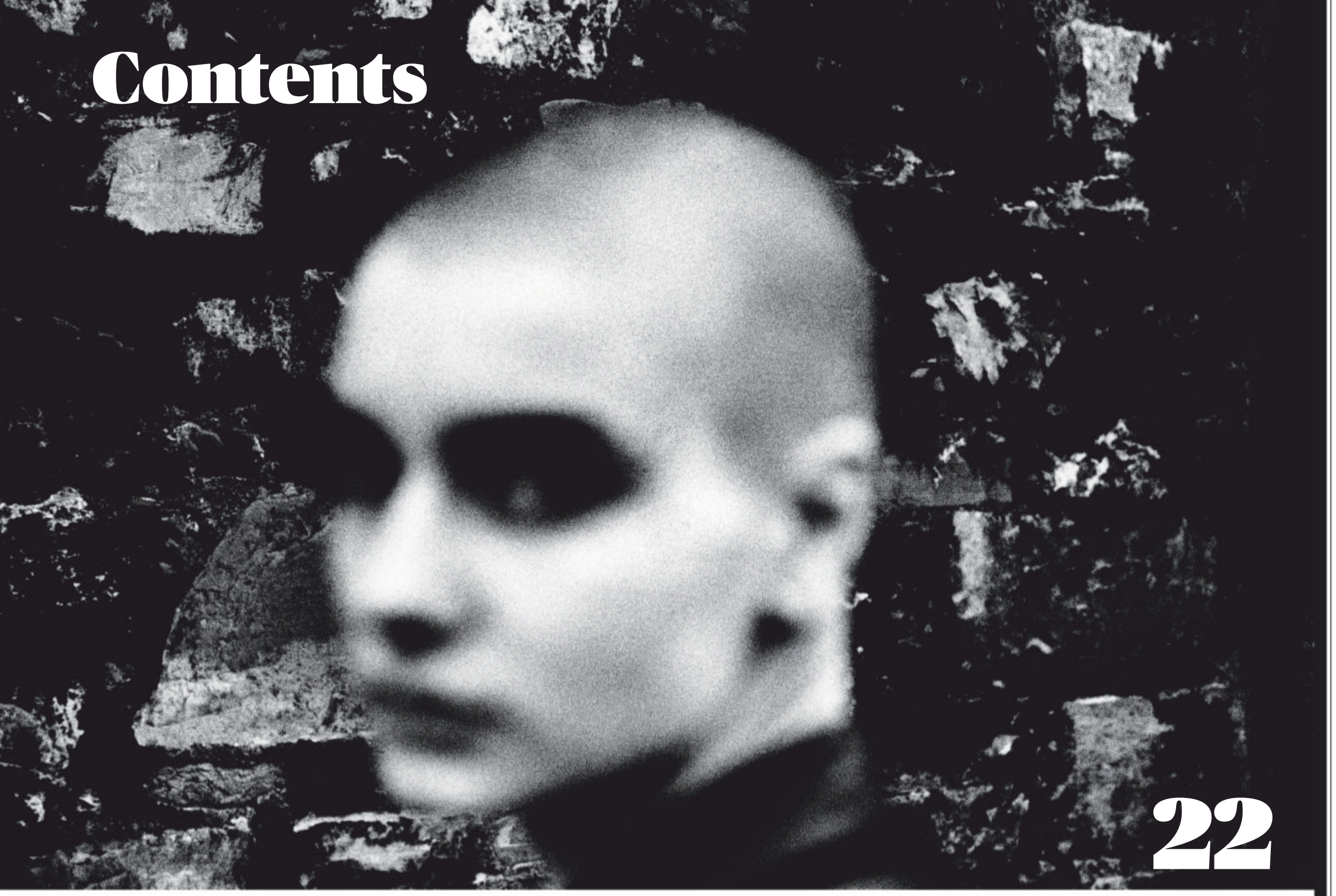

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Karol G photographed in Los Angeles on July 19 by **Domen & Van de Velde**.

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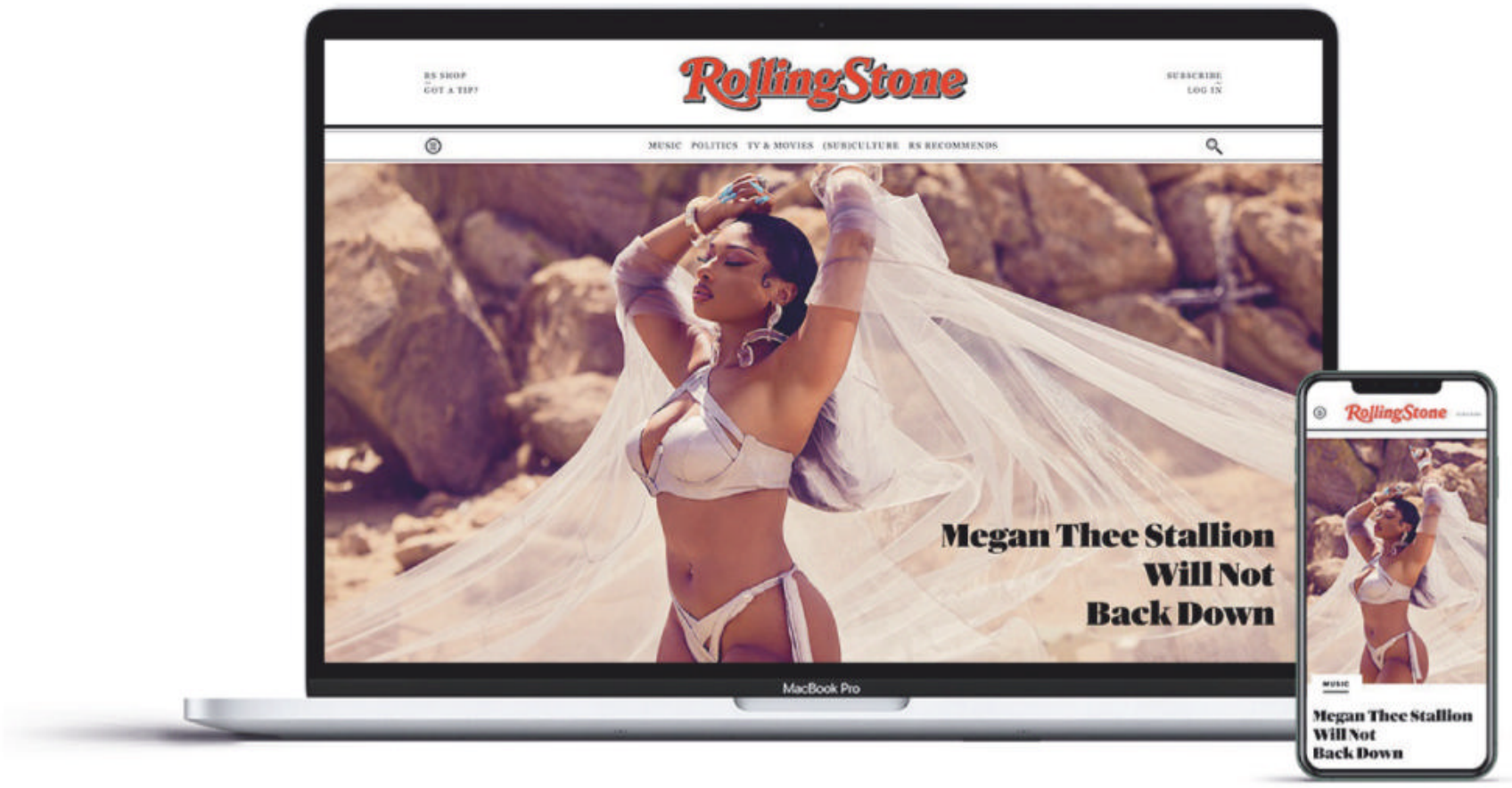

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Contributors

BEHIND THE ISSUE

Shooting Reggaeton's New Queen

Giel Domen and Kenneth Van de Velde

Photographers

Giel Domen and Kenneth Van de Velde aim to create a "beautiful, cohesive story" when they work together. The duo strike a balance with their respective strengths: Domen is the visionary behind the lens; Van de Velde is the technical expert who brings each vision to life through lighting and framing. For *Rolling Stone*'s September cover shoot with Karol G, the Belgian-born pair used sleek lighting and a crisp focus to capture a rising superstar who's ready to take on the world. "When you portray an iconic figure like Karol G, you want to have sharp pictures," Domen says. He adds that their work often includes enhanced-reality features like the avant-garde couture that Karol wears on this cover. "We want to let people dream again," Domen says.

ACTION! On the set with Karol G

A Warm, Romantic Portrait of a Rising Hollywood Star

Yè Fan

Photographer

When photographer Yè Fan shot actor Eve Hewson for this issue ("A Star Finally Finds Her Voice," p. 13), she guessed that her subject was a Scorpio: "Her whole vibe to me is a mystery," Fan says. In fact, Hewson is a Cancer, but Fan captured some of that mysterious energy all the same, creating an image where warm hues and blurred edges frame Hewson's knowing smile. "We wanted to keep it romantic, frame-wise," Fan says. The Chinese-born, New York-based photographer — who began her photography practice in 2016 after leaving a career in live-entertainment sponsorship — utilized vintage manual Voigtländer lenses to help create a "painting-like quality," with background shapes that bleed and blend like watercolors. "I love working with these old lenses," Fan adds. "Each of them is like their own person."

Celebrating 50 Years of Hip-Hop in Music and Art

Andre Gee

Writer

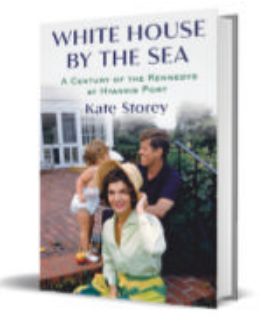
When staff writer Andre Gee interviewed RZA for this issue's Q&A page (p. 27), he was impressed by the Wu-Tang Clan founder. "He's super knowledgeable, but also super personable," he says. A Washington, D.C., native, Gee covers hip-hop for *Rolling Stone* and aims to make readers more cognizant of the genre's social dynamics. He and RZA discussed how the veteran artist wants to help forge a path for younger generations to age gracefully. Elsewhere in this issue, Gee writes about "The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century" (p. 16), a museum exhibit featuring young artists of color and their interpretations of hip-hop music, style, and culture. "The people in power who are able to curate at these institutions are children of hip-hop," Gee says. "It's just inherent to them."

Storey

NEW BOOK

Inside the Kennedy Compound

How a small Cape Cod town became intertwined with one of America's most famous political families



IN HER BESTSELLING nonfiction debut, *White House by the Sea: A Century of the Kennedys at Hyannis Port* (Scribner), senior features editor Kate Storey frames the tale of one of America's most celebrated political dynasties around their idyllic summer home in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts. "I've always been very interested in stories with a strong sense of place," Storey says. Before taking her current position at *Rolling Stone*, she was a staff writer for *Esquire*, reporting on a wide range of subjects that included the rise and fall of *George*, John F. Kennedy Jr.'s magazine on politics and pop culture in the Nineties. The stories she unearthed there inspired Storey to go deeper into the Kennedys' history, and soon she was exploring the unique charms that have drawn generation after generation in their family to Hyannis Port, the small town on Cape Cod where patriarch Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. first bought property in the 1920s. Through meticulous archival research and interviews with more than 120 sources — including 12 members of the Kennedy family — Storey learned about everything from the white-pine planks of the houses in Hyannis Port to the visits in more recent years from Oprah Winfrey, Taylor Swift, and other celebrities who have come to enjoy the Kennedys' view of Nantucket Sound for themselves. The result is a book that one review praised as a "treasure trove of interesting, amusing, and poignant stories and anecdotes." "I really like stories that allow us to see someone we think we know through a different lens," Storey adds.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY DOMEN & VAN DE VELDE; EMILY BADGLEY/STUDIO FORMICHETTI; GRIFFIN LOTZ, 2; COURTESY OF YE FAN.

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Rina Seizes the Moment at Glastonbury

RINA SAWAYAMA made headlines this year at Glastonbury with an emphatic speech against music-biz racism and sexism, seemingly directed at labelmate Matty Healy — but before she took the stage at the U.K. festival, she was thinking about how excited she was to bring the high drama of her *Hold the Girl* set to the country where she grew up. "It was an incredibly emotional weekend," says the singer, 33, who popped up again to sing "Don't Go Breaking My Heart" with her friend Elton John when he headlined the next day. "After the show, I literally came offstage sobbing, it was such an amazing, cathartic experience."

Sawayama backstage before her Glastonbury performance in June

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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

A Star Finally Finds Her Voice

Eve Hewson plays a woman who sings to escape in the movie musical 'Flora and Son'

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Yé Fan**

EVE HEWSON

LIFE ON THE EDGE Flora (Hewson) is a single mom to son Max (Orén Kinlan).

EVE HEWSON will not be doing karaoke today. "I have to be really, really hammered to do karaoke," the actress explains, walking through New York's Central Park. "I would really have to be a whole bottle of tequila deep." Not that she is opposed to such things ("I mean, I *am* Irish"), but it's 10 a.m. on a Wednesday, and up until very, very recently, sober public singing – or sober singing of any kind, really – was a complete nonstarter. "Absolutely not," she says. "Hard no. It was absolutely my biggest fear."

So she'd played a non-singing nurse in *The Knick,* a non-singing prostitute in *The Luminaries,* and a non-singing murderer in *Bad Sisters.* Then she'd taken a sleeping pill on a flight to London, read the script to *Flora and Son* – about a struggling single mom who finds a guitar and a way to forge a relationship with her teenage son – found it to be a "slam dunk," and decided not to "shit my pants," as she usually does at the thought of playing a chanteuse, but instead to call her agent and make a case for why John Carney, the writer-director of *Once,* should give her the main role: "I said, 'I can give you something that sounds like a real person trying to express themselves, rather than someone who is trained or has a natural gift.' I think it was the sleeping pill. I was kind of like, 'I'm just gonna have to put my big-girl panties on and learn how to fucking sing.'"

Which she did, flying to L.A. and spending the next few months in musical boot camp, not with her dad – who just so happens to be Paul Hewson, a.k.a. Bono – but rather with Eric Vetro. "He does Ariana Grande, Scarlett Johansson, and everyone who sings in a movie," Hewson tells me. "He basically became my therapist." She also brushed up on guitar, courtesy of Yousician. Then she reached out to Carney to ask for the film's songs so that she could start practicing them, only to learn that … there weren't any songs to practice – yet. "I'm like, 'What the fuck? We're supposed to be shooting next week!' And he's like, 'Yeah, yeah, no, we're gonna go to the studio this weekend, and you and I are going to try and come up with something.' "

By this point in the conversation, Hewson and I have found our way over to the track around the Central Park reservoir, which is exactly where she was first seen in a film. "I was sitting right here, with New York in the background," she says of her appearance in a short movie her tutor shot while the family was tagging along with U2's tour, as they did each summer. "I didn't have any lines. I just sat there. But – I don't know – I felt just completely comfortable with the camera." Legend has it that the director of photography was so moved that he cried.

Hewson's parents, Bono and activist Ali Hewson, were less moved, and made it perfectly clear that a career in the arts wasn't recommended for any of their four children. There were the summers on tour, sure, seeing the world and glomming on to the rockstar lifestyle. But the rest of the year was explicitly designed to be a counterpoint to that for the Hewson clan. They went to church on Sundays. She attended her local primary school. When it came to secondary school, Hewson schlepped it on public transport. "There would be the odd fucking teenage dickhead that would sing 'It's a Beautiful Day' at me on the train, and I'd just be like, 'Um, OK.' But Irish people have a really good sense of humor. We take the piss out of each other every five seconds."

Growing up, Hewson, 32, ran with a "big motley crew" who were often the children of friends her parents met in middle school, before U2 was even the foggiest idea. "There wasn't much going on," she says of their sleepy Dublin suburb. "So we reenacted the Kylie Minogue and Robbie Williams music videos. We'd put a coin in a bowl of flour and try and get it out with our hands behind our back." On Wednesdays, Hewson would get together with a local theater troupe and perform Monty Python scenes. There was a period when "the most fun thing to do" was rent a bunch of movies, watch them on repeat, and then prank call people. Sometimes they would pull numbers from her dad's contact list. Sometimes they would prank call Justin Timberlake.

At 15, Hewson's tutor cast her in a feature film. "And that was the kicker," she says. "That was the moment I was committed." She spent a summer studying at the New York Film Academy. She got accepted into the prestigious Tisch acting program at NYU. She moved to New York and "would walk up Sixth Avenue in my all-black attire, smoking cigarettes and chugging coffee, reciting my monologues in my head, feeling like a true thespian." When her parents voiced concerns, she pushed back on the pushback. "My dad's dad told him not to sing, so I kind of threw that back in his face," she says.

Then again, there have been times when being who she is, both physically and metaphysically, has been a bit of a mindfuck in an industry known for fucking with minds. "I have grown up with people having an idea of who I am before I've even met them," she says. "Way before I walk into the room, people have decided whether they like me or they don't, and that's a strong thing to consistently have growing up. And it's also hard to talk about because then people are like, 'Oh, she's complaining about her privilege.' "

Which, to be clear, she isn't. She's just trying to explain that, maybe more than the average person, she's had to question every single time whether an offer was "real" or only being offered "because, you know, they wanted the headline of Bono's daughter being in it," she says, dropping her voice low when she says "Bono's daughter." When she auditioned for *The Knick,* the casting director submitted just her first name ("like I was Madonna or something"). She doesn't know who told director Steven Soderbergh whose kid she was. "But I think when he found out, he was like, 'OK, I have to meet her,' because obviously he thought I would be some head wreck," she says wryly. "We have bad PR as a collective nepo-baby group. We need a new PR team. It's hard out there for the nepo babies."

It's probably a testament to her solidity – and her Irish penchant for taking the piss – that when *New York* magazine published its nepo-baby cover story last year, Hewson dove headlong into the fray. "Actually pretty devastated i'm not featured in the nepo baby article like haven't they seen my hit show Bad Sisters??? The NERVE," [*Cont. on 77*]

FAST FACTS

WHAT'S IN A NAME?
Hewson is named after her time and date of birth: 7 a.m. on July 7 ("Eve is in seven").

BUT THERE'S MORE …
Though she goes by Eve, her birth name is a bit longer: Memphis Eve Sunny Day Iris Hewson.

GOODBYE TO A GREAT
Hewson starred as the daughter of James Gandolfini's character in one of his final films, 2013's *Enough Said*.

LET'S DUET
At her 21st-birthday party in Las Vegas, parents Bono and Ali serenaded Hewson with Lady Gaga's "Telephone."

PREVIOUS PAGE: HAIR BY ANTHONY CAMPBELL AT A-FRAME. MAKEUP BY BRIGITTE REISS-ANDERSEN AT A-FRAME. STYLING BY KATE YOUNG AT THE WALL GROUP. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY SEAN NGUYEN. DRESS AND CARDIGAN BY DRIES VAN NOTEN. EARRINGS BY BOTTEGA VENETA. THIS PAGE: APPLE TV+

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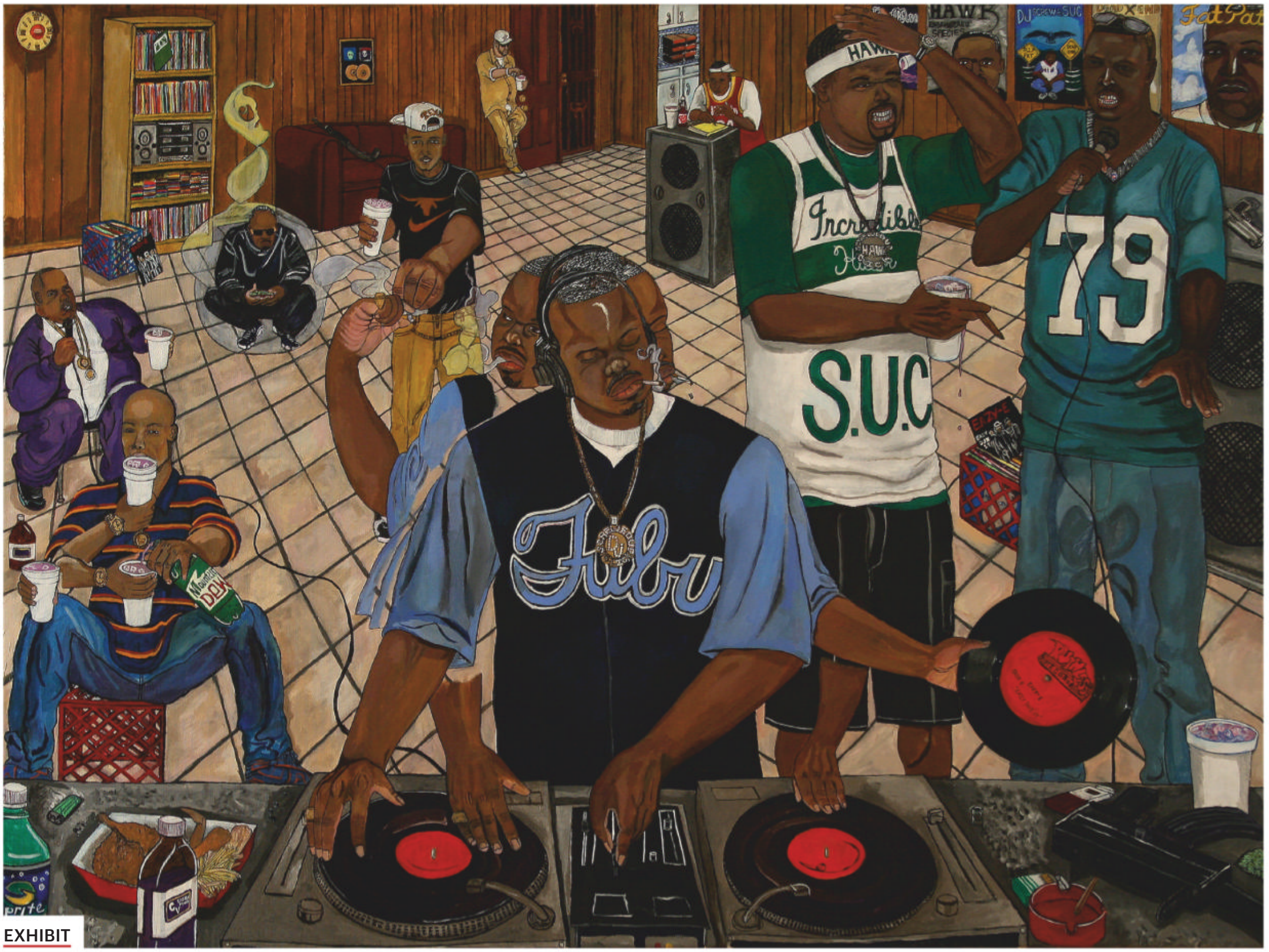

EXHIBIT

A Kaleidoscope of Hip-Hop Art

A wide-ranging show at the Saint Louis Art Museum this fall celebrates 'The Culture'

HIP-HOP IS FINALLY getting the high-art recognition it deserves, thanks to "The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century." The exhibit – currently on view at the Saint Louis Art Museum through Jan. 1, following a successful run at the Baltimore Museum of Art – contains about 70 paintings, photography, ceramics, and other artworks celebrating musicians like Tupac Shakur, the Notorious B.I.G., and Cardi B, as interpreted by noted artists including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Carrie Mae Weems, and Gordon Parks, along with many younger artists of color working today. Each piece in the show has an accompanying song. "Imagine how often you go to museums, but don't hear music, let alone hip-hop music," says Andréa Purnell, who curated the exhibit along with Asma Naeem, Gamynne Guillotte, and Hannah Klemm. "In this show, that's the soundtrack." Next year, "The Culture" is scheduled to travel to museums in Cincinnati, Germany, and Canada. Naeem and Purnell talked to us about some of the standout pieces in the exhibit. **ANDRE GEE**

The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century, $55

PURPLE HEAVEN

El Franco Lee II's "DJ Screw in Heaven" (2008) is centered on the late Houston legend. Purnell champions the "layers" in the painting, including time-lapse imagery and stories in every corner of the frame.

TAKING SPACE

This self-portrait from Monica Ikegwu's diptych "Open/Closed" (2021) appears in a section that Purnell says is about "the ways ... hip-hop lives in the body."

BOTTOM: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE MYRTIS

▶ ALL SHADES

Baltimore-born, New York-based artist Derrick Adams often works with vibrant hues and geometric shapes that evoke Cubism in his portraits. The woman depicted in "Style Variation 34" (2020) is a celebration of Black skin tones, as well as the ways that Black people adorn their hair.

▼ CHARM CITY

Zéh Palito is the Brazil-born, Baltimore-based artist who made this 2022 painting, titled "It was all a dream." Naeem observes hints of complexity in what seems like a peaceful scene: "The somber expressions of the figures in the painting are in stark contrast to the swirling bright colors surrounding them, perhaps indicating all is not what it seems."

▲ ART FOR SALE

Purnell notes how Moroccan artist Hassan Hajjaj's "Cardi B Unity" contrasts the star's luxury look with the products around her: "Even if you didn't know who she was, you're still like, 'OK, something's happening there.'" (The artwork is dated 2017/1438, reflecting the Gregorian and Muslim calendars.)

◀ CONCRETE ROSE

Naeem explains that this Alvaro Barrington work from 2021 is meant as a tribute to Tupac Shakur, who told "the story of the [U.S.] War on Drugs as a war against working-class Black communities." Titled "They have They Cant," Barrington's artwork references Pac's lyric "They got money for wars, but can't feed the poor," as well as visually depicting his image of a "rose that grew from concrete."

◀ FEELIN' FENDI

Jordan Casteel's "Fendi" (2018), showing a person clutching a designer bag on the subway, raises questions about materialism and status. Naeem says that Casteel's work often "honors people around her using the tradition of portraiture, which has been used to depict royalty."

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND YOSSI MILO GALLERY, NEW YORK; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, SIMOES DE ASSIS AND LUCE GALLERY; NO CREDIT; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THADDAEUS ROPAC/© ALVARO BARRINGTON

PROFILE

Danny Brown Comes Clean

Fresh out of rehab, he's rapping better than ever and trying to stay away from drugs and alcohol

By ANTHONY MALONE

SPEAK NOW
When he was making his new album, Brown says, "I didn't know how long I was going to be living. It was one of those 'I'm going to say what the fuck I want to say on this shit.'"

DANNY BROWN SITS quietly at a hotel restaurant table in Manhattan's West Village, staring off into the distance with a stoic expression. The outdoor seating area is absent of any other guests besides the rapper and his manager, but he'd stand out even in a crowded room: Today he has on a vibrant look that includes a blue-gradient collared shirt, an extremely baggy pair of jeans, and the bright red, Astro Boy-esque MSCHF boots that had the internet in a chokehold earlier this year. When a waiter comes by to take any beverage orders, Brown immediately asks him to take away the alcohol menu. "I'm in a good space mentally," he says afterward. "I'm happy and stuff. I just don't want to be around that right now."

This interview was originally planned to take place in Detroit, Brown's hometown and the place where his addiction issues began. Instead, we're here in New York on an afternoon when Canadian wildfire smoke has blanketed the city in a gray haze. Since relocating from Detroit to Austin in 2021 – and especially since going to rehab this spring – Brown, 42, has been trying to take on a healthier lifestyle. When the waiter returns, he orders duck breast and a Coke.

Brown's fondness for drugs and alcohol has been a key subject of the music that made him one of the wildest, most acclaimed rappers of his generation, going back to his breakthrough 2011 album, *XXX*, where he rapped about taking shots of Hennessy spiked with Molly and "sniffing Adderall off the counter in my kitchen." Listening to him back then felt like falling backward off a cliff – his songs were filled with adrenaline, euphoria, and an uncertainty that felt thrilling.

Brown has warm memories of recording *XXX* during off hours at a Detroit studio where he knew an engineer. "I'd be having to wake up at five in the morning, and we'd sneak in there and he'd give me an hour or two to knock out what I can," Brown recalls. "I'd probably knock out three or four songs." In retrospect, that time was also tinged with hints of darkness. "I was wilding," he continues. "I had just started experimenting with drugs and shit. That was when it was the fun stages. But I was old enough to know what I was getting myself into."

Life changed drastically for him following the release of *XXX*. He began touring heavily as he entered his thirties, making consistent money off of music for the first time. "Back in those times, I would make albums and I would stress myself out so much about the reception of it," he says. "I would almost do drugs to cope with that shit. I wouldn't sleep. Be up worried that if people said it sucked, my career is over."

Brown sees his seventh studio album, *Quaranta,* due out this fall, as a chance for closure. It's his most personal album by far, a confessional spurred by pain, isolation, and hitting rock bottom. Compared with his past works, he sounds more serious and focused, taking aim at his own shortcomings along with mediocre rappers. "It was almost like, 'I got to get it out,'" he says. "I didn't know how long I was going to be living. It was one of those 'I'm going to say what the fuck I want to say on this shit. I'm going to let everybody know how I'm feeling.'"

As we talk, a man walks by the table and engages Brown in conversation about the changes in fashion among younger gener-

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Justin J. Wee**

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ations, sparked by those viral boots. Soon he's offering to sell us some weed. "He would've been my homie a year ago," Brown says with an exhale as the stranger walks away disappointed. "I didn't have any intentions of stopping smoking weed. I was just going to rehab for drinking. But once you get in there, you learn so much shit."

In late March, after a disastrously drunk podcast appearance where he criticized his label, Warp Records, Brown checked into rehab thanks to a grant provided by the Recording Academy's Musicares program. "I started eating healthy when I was in there because they had good-ass food," he says. "The rehab that I went to, it's fucking $50,000-a-month rehab."

Along with a healthier diet, Brown found faith, spirituality, and a new outlook on life in rehab. A decade ago, the idea of death scared him. "I was scared of this shit," he says. "Now, I just look at it like, 'Man, when it's the time, it's the time.' It's almost like life is a school, and when you die, it's graduation. When the higher power is ready for you to graduate, you'll graduate. And obviously, I haven't done what I'm supposed to here."

This realization didn't strictly begin during his sobriety, he admits: "I had a crazy-ass mushroom trip one time where I saw my grave and shit. So ever since then, I became a lot more comfortable with it."

As recently as last summer, he claims, he was taking up to 14 grams of psilocybin mushrooms each day. "I think that really fucked my brain up," he says. "Because I can lay down and get ready to go to bed, and I can see visuals and shit. A person that never took mushrooms before, they'd be freaked out by the shit I see when I close my eyes." These days, he's sleeping eight to 10 hours a night. "I guess I'm catching up for all the sleep that I wasn't getting when I was drugging. And I'm having vivid, movie dreams."

Brown has arguably never been sharper as a rapper than he is right now. *Quaranta* comes after his 2019 album, *uknowhatimsayin¿*, executive-produced by Q-Tip; his surprise collab with JPEGMAFIA this year, titled *SCARING THE HOES*; and perhaps best of all, a skull-liquefying verse on billy woods' "Year Zero." "I still love hip-hop," Brown says. "I got to the point where I stopped worrying about the negative and started just looking at all the positives about it."

Unfortunately, he doesn't remember much about that session with billy woods, due to being blackout drunk at the time. "I was an alcoholic; I am an alcoholic," he says. "I was walking around the Lower East Side, stopping at bars, drinking everywhere... I probably shouldn't have gone based on where I was at physically. But when you're blacked-out drunk, you're trying to do whatever's fun. I'm like, 'What? billy woods at the studio? Fucking let's go over there!' I went over there and rapped. And I don't even remember that shit."

He wrote most of *Quaranta* at the Bruiser Brigade house in Detroit, where Brown and the artists signed to the label he founded would stay and work on their own projects all day. It was a rough time for Brown: He was going through a bad breakup, and he'd moved to rapidly gentrifying downtown Detroit just as the pandemic set in. "I'm stuck in this fucking penthouse apartment," he says. "Can't even have guests over. The security at the door. I'm in there by myself, depressed, doing fucking coke and getting drunk every night by myself."

At the same time, he was facing financial pressure due to shows getting canceled, including a booked European tour. "I literally was going broke," he says. "All my savings went bad. My credit card was over. But I was putting it on myself, too. I was doing drugs still. Before I know it, I just sniffed up my house, and I've got no money coming in."

In the past year, he's been rethinking his early life in Detroit in the Eighties. For the most part, he had a good home life as a kid, with incentives like video games to distract him from going into the streets. Knowing Brown was into rap music, his dad got him a set of turntables to record. "I was raised around low-budget studio equipment," he says. "I didn't get to go to a real studio until I turned 18 and I got my own money – and by then, I already knew how to fucking do shit."

In the early days of the pandemic, Brown says, "I literally was going broke. Before I know it, I just sniffed up my house, and I've got no money coming in."

He says that he and his siblings were often left unsupervised by their young parents: "In some sense, they still wanted to be kids too. They wanted to be able to live their life. My mom still wanted to go to the nightclub on weekends. So she'd leave us with anybody who will watch us – uncle or somebody, cousin type shit. And that's where we got into a lot of the bad shit that kids aren't supposed to be getting into."

But he's also learning to take accountability for his actions. He's been practicing the Serenity Prayer, which he learned in rehab. In his mind, making an album like *Quaranta* – a cathartic release of everything he was going through before getting help with his drug and alcohol problems – is a chance for him to start over.

"It's almost like that was my way of just getting shit out," he says. "I was so fucking caught up in 'Am I going to live tomorrow?' It was almost like, if I died, this is what I have to say. That's where I was at with it. This is all my shit."

SPOTLIGHT

Xolo Maridueña Is a Man on a Mission

Star of the hit series 'Cobra Kai' is changing the superhero game as armored avenger Blue Beetle

XOLO MARIDUEÑA has been an action star since he was 16, when he debuted on *Cobra Kai* as Miguel, a budding karate champ who gets Mr. Miyagi-ed by both Danny LaRusso (Ralph Macchio) and Johnny Lawrence (William Zabka). But this summer, he's set to become a full-blown superhero, playing the title role in DC's *Blue Beetle* (out Aug. 18). "Even after booking the project, it didn't feel real," says Maridueña, who finally accepted it after watching the finished film. "Seeing the Warner Brothers and DC logos, that's when I was like, 'Holy crap.' "

Unlike June's *The Flash,* already a notorious flop, *Blue Beetle* is a fresh start – DC Films co-chief James Gunn has said it's the first film to be set in his new DC universe, a full two years before the next one, 2025's *Superman: Legacy*. For Maridueña, whose family has Cuban, Mexican, and Ecuadorian roots, what really makes the film special is its Latin representation – his character, Jaime Reyes, is Mexican American, and the director, Angel Manuel Soto, and the screenwriter, Gareth Dunnet-Alcocer, are both Latino. "When you have people behind the camera who are representative of the people that they're trying to encapsulate in front of the camera, you can't help but feel authentic," Maridueña says.

He was supposed to have an even bigger 2023, with the final season of *Cobra Kai* on Netflix, but the writers strike shut down production after a few episodes. "The writers need their money," says Maridueña, who promises the wait will be worth it. "I just can't wait to see it come full circle." **BRIAN HIATT**

This interview was conducted before the strike.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Corinne Schiavone**

STYLING BY MADELEINE KENNEDY FOR THE ONLY AGENCY. JACKET BY RED SEPTEMBER. SWEATSHIRT BY ACNE STUDIOS. JEWELRY BY MARTYRE.

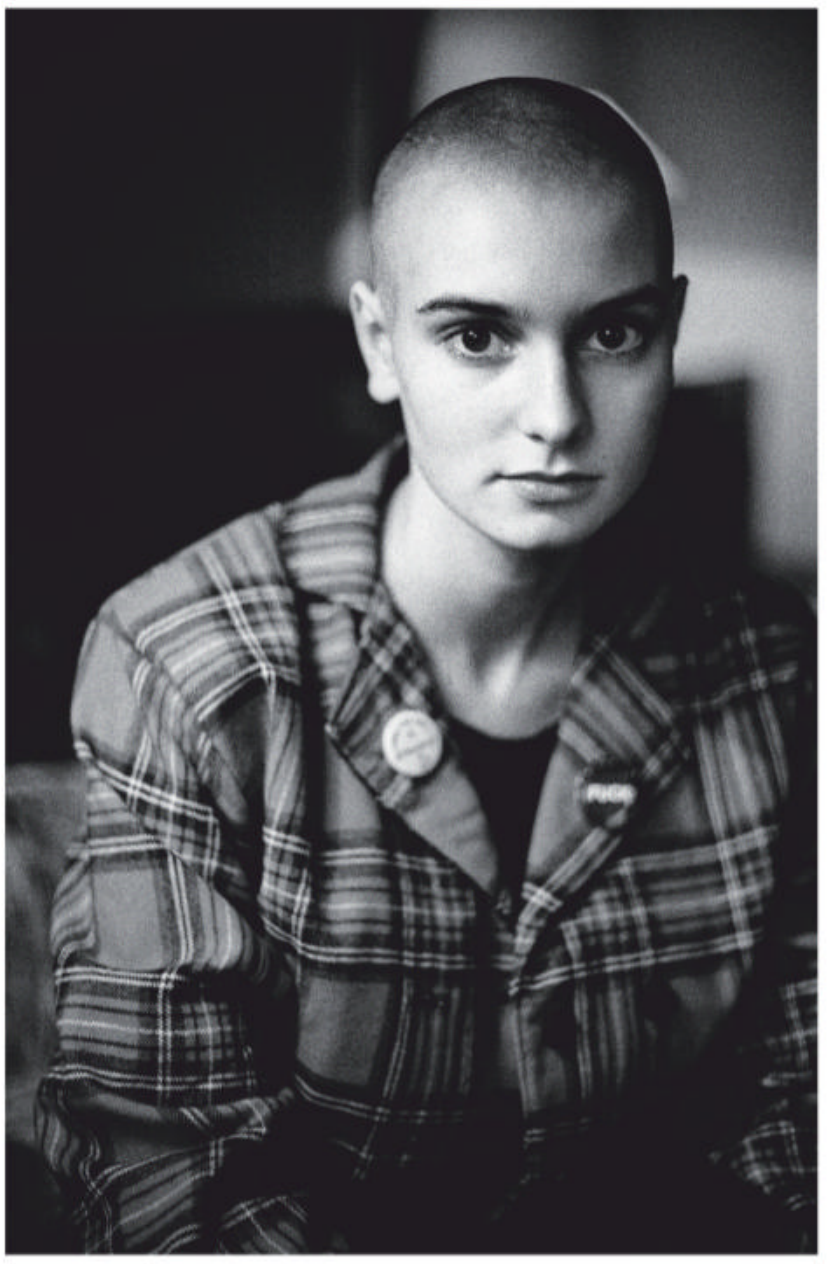
[SINÉAD O'CONNOR, 1966-2023]

'She Made a Huge Sacrifice'

Even as she got a raw deal from the music industry, O'Connor taught so many stars to stand up for what's right

By PHOEBE BRIDGERS

Phoebe Bridgers wasn't yet born when Sinéad O'Connor ripped up a photo of the pope on "Saturday Night Live" in 1992, in protest of sexual abuse by the Catholic Church. Years later, Bridgers would immerse herself deeply into O'Connor's music, life, and beliefs. After she became a highly acclaimed singer-songwriter (and a member of boygenius), Bridgers would cover "Black Boys on Mopeds," a song O'Connor wrote partly about the death of a young Black man in England accused by police of stealing a scooter. It's just one example of how, as Bridgers tells ROLLING STONE*, O'Connor made a huge impact on artists long after she'd been ostracized by the music business.*



NOTHING COMPARED 2 HER
O'Connor in 1987. "I had a very, very short-shaved head in high school," Bridgers says. "I definitely shaved it for Sinéad."

I PROBABLY FIRST heard Sinéad O'Connor thanks to my mom, who had – and still has – the coolest taste in music. I knew that Sinéad was a revolutionary, and I was obsessed with her and the "Nothing Compares 2 U" video. I even had a very, very short-shaved head in high school; I definitely shaved it for Sinéad. I have the worst-shaped head, so there aren't many people I would have done that for.

When I was a kid, I pretended to know what she was talking about. Later, I started digging into what she stood for. She has a rap ["Famine"] about the famine in Ireland that was forced upon them by the British government. When I first heard it, I thought, "This is funny – Sinéad O'Connor rapping." But later I thought, "Whoa, I actually learned a bunch of things I didn't know."

So many protest songs, especially post-Bob Dylan, are so fucking corny. They feel like people knew they were *supposed* to write a protest song or appease a larger group they felt they should be a part of. But Sinéad always [espoused] things that she actually believed, not things she was told to believe by somebody else, even if it was completely subversive.

That's exemplified in "Black Boys on Mopeds." The thing about covering her is that she makes the hardest things to sing sound so easy. Her vocal styling is unlike anything else. She does that Irish-folk thing with her voice, the same way [the Cranberries'] Dolores O'Riordan did, that is just so hard to do. I think you have to grow up doing it, and it's fucking incredible. I had to practice "Black Boys on Mopeds" so much to even do a for-idiots version of it.

I never met or saw Sinéad live, unfortunately. When I heard she died, I was heartbroken. It reminded me of that one year, 2016, when everyone was dying, like Leonard Cohen and David Bowie. I thought, "There's a hero I won't meet." When Sinéad died, it hit me the same way.

Whether it's her opinions about the famine or the Catholic Church or Margaret Thatcher, history is on her side in a way it wasn't at the time. People and the media were not nice to her. She was ostracized, and so many people thought she was a grumpy person. It's *abuse* to be told to shut up and sing. It's *abuse* to be worshipped and then hated. It's such a sad and heartbreaking story. Behind every famous woman are tons and tons of rape and death threats. She made a huge sacrifice for women and for musicians and for people who believe in things.

If your entryway into politics or standing for something is because you want to be awesome like Sinéad O'Connor, then great. She embodied what it means to be a musician and stand for something. Maybe it's the internet, but in today's landscape, people are told what is kosher to believe in and they just do that or the bare minimum. She was not like that at all. She made me feel like I was allowed to stand for things. It's still hard, but I feel validated, and that my beliefs are taken seriously. That world exists because of Sinéad's sacrifice. *As told to David Browne*

ROB VERHORST/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

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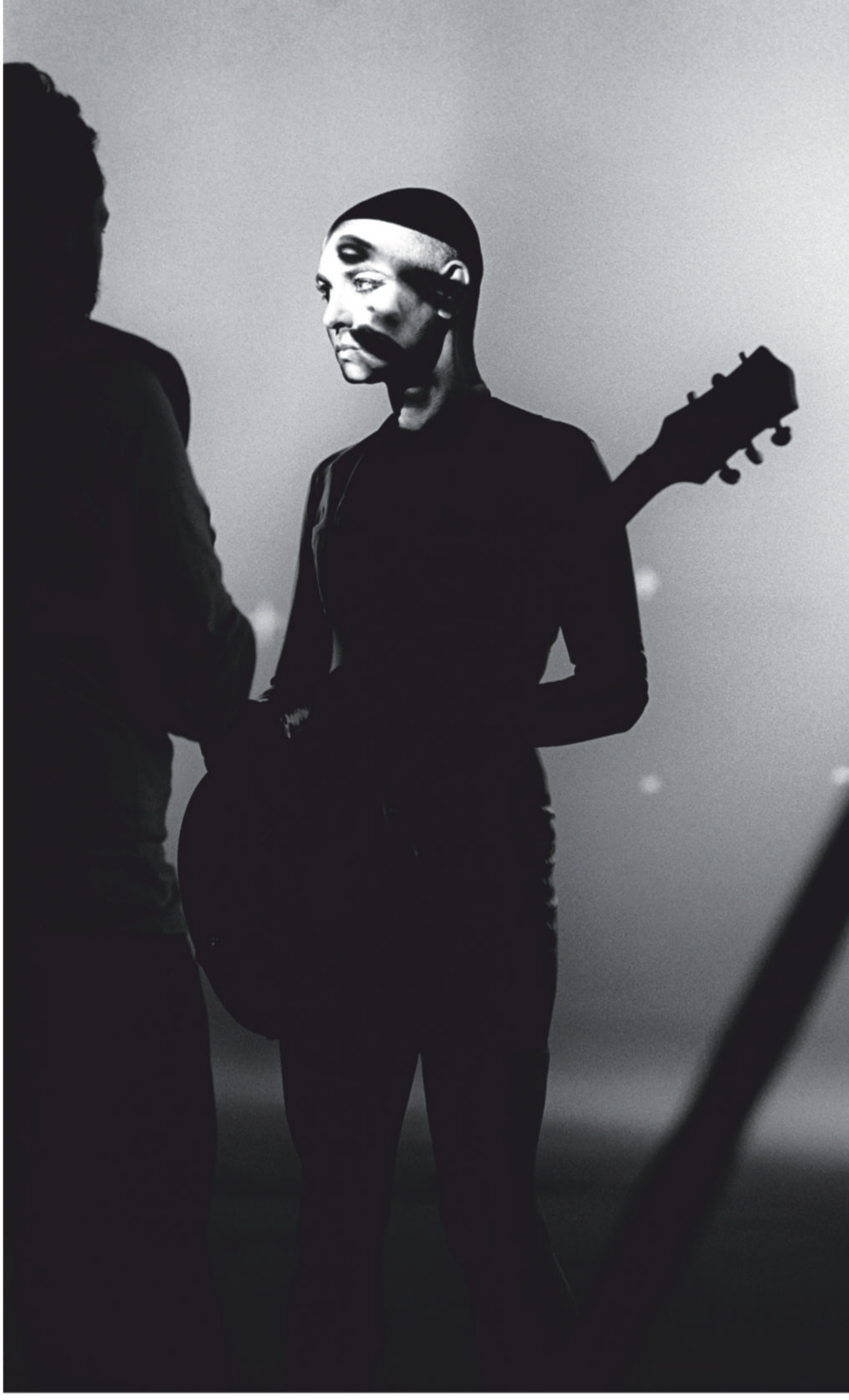
[SINÉAD O'CONNOR]

'Strong Sinéad': The Lost Photos

WHEN DAVID BELISLE arrived in London in 2014 to take photos of Sinéad O'Connor, he found an artist who finally seemed at peace. She had just released an album, *I'm Not Bossy, I'm the Boss,* and was, Belisle recalls, "in a great place. She was in such incredible shape. She had quit smoking cigarettes and everything." O'Connor invited Belisle to take photos as she shot a video for "Take Me to Church." Trying to learn the location of the shoot, Belisle got a sense of her wit. "I wasn't hearing from anyone," he says. "Then, the night before, she texted: 'We don't know where yet. It's like Kim Kardashian's fucking wedding.' "

In the years after the video shoot, O'Connor's life would take a tragic turn: She was forced to cancel a tour for *I'm Not Bossy* after needing an emergency hysterectomy, and two years later she suffered a public breakdown, during which she was reported missing. In 2022, she was devastated by the death of her son, Shane. Finally, in July of this year, she was found dead at her home in London at age 56. These never-seen-before photos come from that 2014 shoot, capturing a fiery but contented period in a turbulent life. DAVID BROWNE



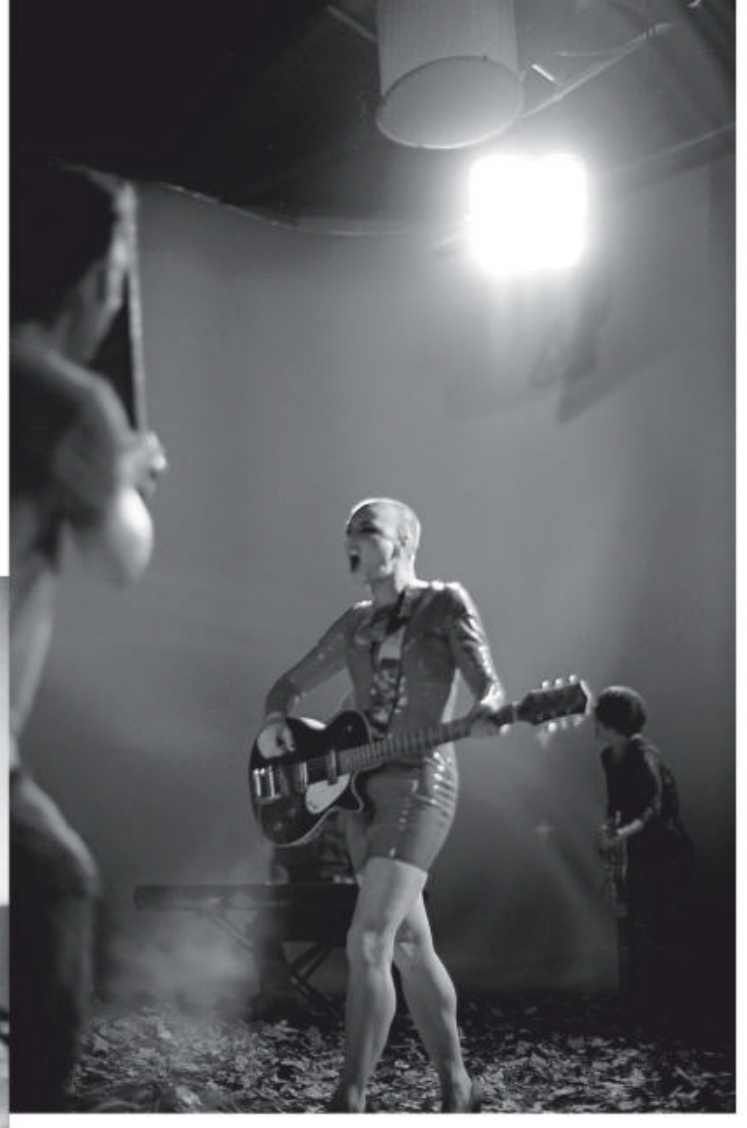
Down to Earth ▸

Belisle captured the moment when footage from O'Connor's classic "Nothing Compares 2 U" video was incorporated into the "Take Me to Church" clip. "They're projecting it onto her face at that precise moment," he says. "And it just looks creepy and weird."

Before the shoot began, Belisle saw O'Connor interact with the people doing her makeup, who weren't aware they were working on an O'Connor video until they arrived. "When I came into the dressing room at the very beginning and saw the person who was doing her nails, her hands were shaking," he says. "And Sinéad said to her, 'Are you hungry? Do you want to eat something?' I felt like Sinéad O'Connor was not impressed with Sinéad O'Connor. She would be in catering with everyone. She just hung out with everyone. She did not want any special treatment at all."

Brighter Side ▾

During a break in the video shoot, O'Connor chilled out with John Reynolds, her producer, ex-husband, and father of one of her children (those are his hands in the photo). "They were just sitting there talking," says Belisle. "She would often see me shooting and then smile or do something funny. Here, she was being cheeky because she knew she was wearing so much makeup. She told me, 'This is the first time I've been in a music video in over 14 years.' So she was a little nervous."

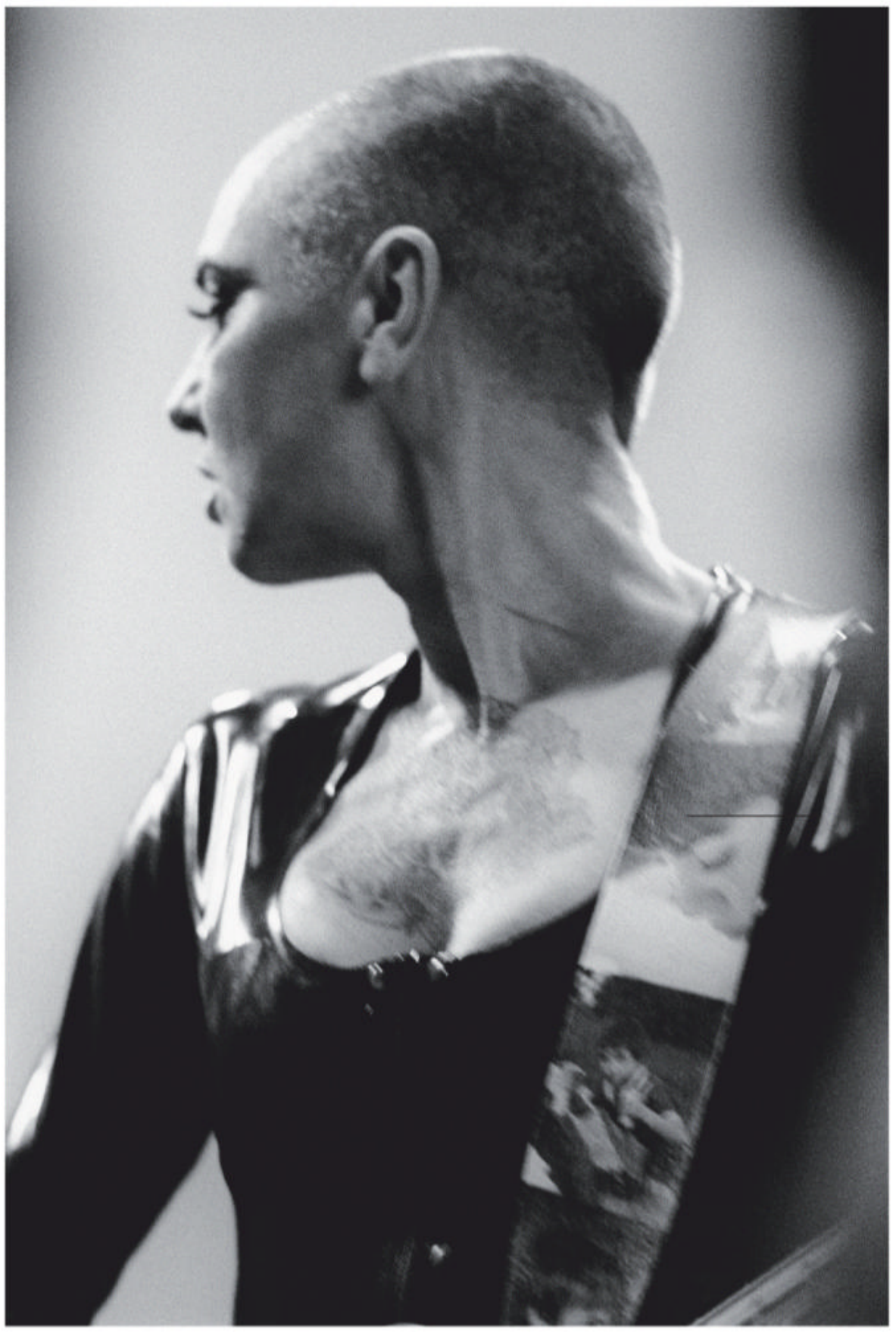


'It Was So Badass' ◂

For the "Take Me to Church" video, O'Connor brought her own wardrobe, including a burgundy-red vinyl dress. "This looks like that strong Sinéad to me," Belisle says. "The lyrics of the song are like, 'I don't wanna be that girl no more/I don't wanna cry no more.' She was wearing a wig, and at the end of the video, she ripped it off. It was so badass."

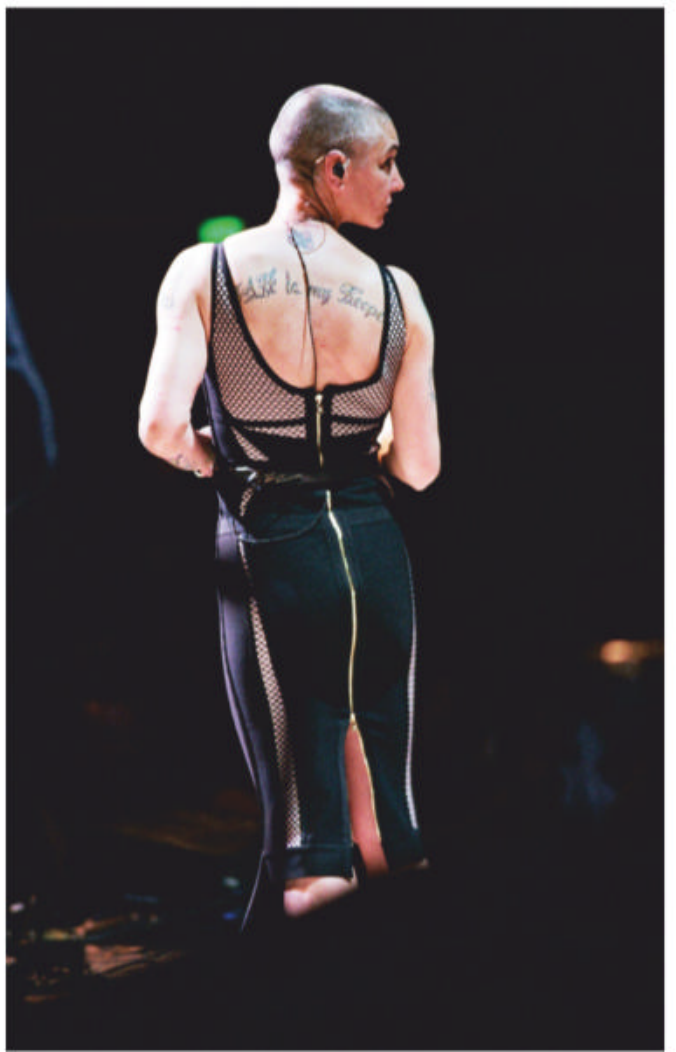
Strapped In ▾

This close-up shot has always stuck out in Belisle's memory. One thing that's striking: O'Connor's guitar strap, which was decorated with photos of the singer's four children. But he was also moved by the sight of O'Connor's neck, and the way it showed the force of her voice. "Her neck muscles showed the strength she got from singing," Belisle says.



Jah Is Her Keeper ▸

At O'Connor's show at the Vienna State Opera House in 2014, Belisle captured the "Jah Is My Keeper" tattoo on her back — a line from Peter Tosh's "Creation" that was a nod to her love of reggae and Rasta culture. Belisle also noticed a piece of paper taped to her stage monitor that read, in big block letters, "Blow Job." "She got nervous up there, so I think she needed to lighten things up," he says.



DAVID BELISLE, 5

LIVE MUSIC

Rise of the Micro-Targeted Fest

NOT LONG AGO, festivals tried to appeal to as many types of fans as possible, which is why it wasn't weird to see Phish, Bruce Springsteen, Snoop Dogg, and Nine Inch Nails on the same Bonnaroo bill in 2009. But in the past few years, some festivals have reversed course and started to micro-target fans – zeroing in on devotees of early-Eighties New Wave, late-Nineties nu metal, or mid-2000s emo, for example. Many acts on these bills might struggle to fill casino ballrooms on their own, but together they're capable of entertaining upward of 20,000. "The idea that only young, hip acts can draw crowds to a festival is a shortsighted assumption," says Danny Hayes, CEO of Danny Wimmer Presents, which puts on the hard-rock-centric Aftershock festival. "Stereotypes about what young people want should be put aside, and diversity in both music and the people who love it should be celebrated." Here's a look at six fests for very specific audiences.

Events centered on super-specific subgenres, from nu metal to New Wave, are more popular than ever

By ANDY GREENE

	LOVERS AND FRIENDS	JUST LIKE HEAVEN	SICK NEW WORLD	CRUEL WORLD	AFTERSHOCK	WHEN WE WERE YOUNG
	Nineties and 2000s rap and R&B **May 6 LAS VEGAS**	Indie music from the 2000s **May 13 PASADENA, CA**	Late-Nineties nu metal **May 13 LAS VEGAS**	1980s New Wave, post punk, and alternative **May 20 PASADENA, CA**	Hard rock, metal, and punk from the Eighties onward **Oct. 5-8 SACRAMENTO, CA**	Nineties and early-'00s pop punk and emo **Oct. 21-22 LAS VEGAS**
THIS YEAR'S BILL	Missy Elliott, Mariah Carey, Usher, Christina Aguilera, Boyz II Men, Pitbull, and more	Yeah Yeah Yeahs, MGMT, Future Islands, Empire of the Sun, Hot Chip, M83, Caribou, and more	System of a Down, Korn, Deftones, Incubus, Evanescence, Papa Roach, and more	Siouxsie Sioux, Iggy Pop, Human League, Billy Idol, Love and Rockets, Echo & the Bunnymen, and more	Guns N' Roses, Korn, Pantera, Tool, Avenged Sevenfold, Incubus, and more (Kiss played last year)	Green Day, Blink-182, Thirty Seconds to Mars, The Offspring, Good Charlotte, and more
TARGET DEMO	Parents who blast "Fantasy" and "The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)" as they drop their kids off at soccer practice	Your cousin who can't stop yammering about how much better Coachella was 15 years ago	Gen Xers who actually had fun at Woodstock '99	Aging Anglophiles who wish they had enough hair to comb into a Flock of Seagulls do	Your fiftysomething uncle who swears he saw GN'R on the Sunset Strip back in '86	Young parents who still have Hot Topic T-shirts and mascara tucked away deep in their basements
STANDOUT MOMENT	Mariah Carey reunited with Boyz II Men to revive their 1995 chart-topping collaboration, "One Sweet Day."	MGMT sent everyone in a time machine back to 2007 by playing their debut, *Oracular Spectacular*, straight through.	Korn reminded everyone of the weird moment when they were on *TRL* alongside Britney and the Backstreet Boys.	A reunited Love and Rockets performed their classic 1989 hit single "So Alive" for the first time in 27 tears.	That uncle is going to love it when he gets to see the surviving members of Pantera bust out "Cowboys From Hell."	Fans can look forward to Blink-182, reunited with Tom DeLonge, taking them back to seventh grade with "What's My Age Again."
ACT INEXPLICABLY MISSING	Where the hell are All-4-One? This festival could really have used a mass slow dance to "I Swear."	The Strokes. *Is This It* is the era's defining album, and any festival is improved by it.	Limp Bizkit. Did Fred Durst *really* have something better to do than break out "Nookie"?	Devo. This festival won't be legit until everyone gets a chance to put on their red energy domes and "Whip It."	Alice in Chains. There isn't a single person in this crowd who doesn't know every word to "Rooster" and "Man in the Box."	The Killers. Come on, guys — this festival is essentially named after one of their songs.

FROM LEFT: LUTHER REDD; ASHLEY OSBORN; BRIDGET BENNETT/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; QUINN TUCKER; PRISCILLIA RODRIGUEZ; VIRISA YONG

Q&A

RZA

The Wu-Tang legend on the state of rap, being honored by Rihanna and A$AP, and the possibility of a new Wu album

By ANDRE GEE

IT'S THE MIDDLE of summer when RZA hops on Zoom one afternoon, but the Wu-Tang architect and Hollywood maven isn't exactly taking it easy. The Wu-Tang Clan are on tour with Nas for the overseas leg of their New York State of Mind Tour, thrilling crowds while exemplifying the possibilities for hip-hop icons entering middle age. "We have to show the young generation that this can be a lifelong career if you follow the proper path," he says.

RZA, 54, parlayed his music into a decades-long career in Hollywood, acting, producing, and scoring films such as *American Gangster* and *The Man With the Iron Fists*. He also helmed *Wu-Tang: An American Saga*, a three-season-long TV series about the legendary group. These days, RZA says, he's waiting out the Writers Guild strike while touring the world and running 36 Chambers, his vegan-lifestyle company. He's still making music, too, most recently last year's *Saturday Afternoon Kung Fu Theater*, a collaboration with DJ Scratch. And, it turns out, he's just heard something that makes him excited about the possibility of another Wu-Tang album.

We're at Hip-Hop 50. What do you think are some of the biggest things that the community needs to be asking itself heading into the next 50 years?
We're at the base of the mountain, not at the top. Somebody tweeted recently that "we are still not aligned." I think we need to align. Maybe get some of the godfathers to come together and talk about what we're going to do with this culture, and how we're going to protect it, preserve it, and advance it.

The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame didn't come immediately [to hip-hop]. We're happy that now they're inducting some of us. Great. Let's make the Hip-Hop Hall of Fame. The BET hip-hop awards is cool. Love BET. But it's not from us – it's corporate. We need people of the culture to govern and guide the culture.

The *Wu-Tang: American Saga* show chronicles your five-year plan for the group, where you planned Wu's triumph as a group and the solo albums to follow. As you revisited those moments, did it make you wish you had done some things differently?
Not too many things. I think that what I did was necessary. I think that it was ordained. One day, Jay-Z told me, "Yo, I got [the idea for] *The Blueprint* from you." At that time, I was headed to Hollywood already. Now, here's a path, here's a way it can work. And it continued to work in different regions of the country and with different crews.

What do you think Ol' Dirty Bastard would be up to these days? I feel like he'd be the most viral person ever.
[*Laughs.*] He was such a unique talent. He had a couple of left turns that was pretty off course from the person who he really was. I think he would've found his way back on his right path, and potentially would've been one of the greatest artists alive. Who is the greatest artist alive? Let's ask ourselves that real quick.

Stevie Wonder.
Stevie Wonder. He's a great example. It's like ODB will probably be at least 50 percent at that level of popularity in the world. And whether it was his music, his voice, or whatever he was doing every day, he was going to continue to grow to be a globally recognized energy.

What are the chances of a new Wu-Tang album?
We're still here on the Earth, all praises due. We're having a great run on this tour. We're laughing with each other, sharing music with each other. There were a couple of [tracks] I heard that sound like it's very possible. [One in particular] I didn't produce, but I heard it and gave my notes. [Wu producer and DJ] Allah Mathematics went into the studio and took heed to the notes.

Was that something with all the members on the track, or a lot of them?
No, it wasn't a "Triumph" type of joint. It just had that Wu spirit.

Can you speak to how artists like you and the other Wu-Tang members, Nas, Busta Rhymes, Jay-Z, and others are forging a new path for rappers into middle age?
People thought hip-hop was just youth culture. We had no examples like rock & roll, where you have the Rolling Stones playing into their seventies, or the Eagles or Earth, Wind, and Fire. The brothers you just named, Nas, Jay-Z, Wu-Tang, Busta, Joey Cracks, Outkast, pioneered this global success. Not taking nothing from Run-D.M.C. or Rakim and all of them, who also [pioneered hip-hop in the Eighties], but it was the Nineties when the constant multiplatinums just kept coming.

Now, here we are, living different lifestyles than our parents. At 50 years old, my grandfather was already looking at a wheelchair. You look at Method Man, he got more muscles than ever. He's on some Hercules shit at 50. Our strength and our vitality is there.

You play a lot of chess. What are some of your most memorable matches with other notable people?
My most notable is actually with a brother who passed away named Emory Tate. He was a six-time military champion and international master. Chess was bugged

DANIEL HASTINGS

out in the Seventies because it was the Cold War. He got to go to different Army bases and play; they said they wanted to kill him and take his brain because he was whipping ass so bad. Tate was this very unique Black man who loved the game, served his country, and was a fascinating individual.

But on a celebrity level, we get busy. Right now, it's me and my buddy Rob Morgan, and before our brother Jamie Foxx had to take a sit-down for a little while, we had an ongoing rivalry.

People will say it's a rivalry, but it's only one person winning. Was it a back-and-forth rivalry?
[*Laughs.*] I let them tell the rest of it. I am the Abbot.

How did you react when you heard that Rihanna and A$AP Rocky named their kid after you?
It's an honor. It has such an energy and relevance

BRINGING DA RUCKUS Onstage at the 2023 BottleRock Napa Valley festival in California in May

Playing in a tournament in San Francisco in 2008

to it. The R in RZA is for "rule" or "ruler." And to rule something, the first thing you got to try to do is rule yourself, rule your lower and higher nature. A ruler is also something we use to measure things. And so therefore, you have to measure your movements, your ideas, and where you stand at all times before you make your next move to that Z. So to me, that's a beautiful name.

Did they just call you and tell you? Or ask you? Or how did that go?
I'll leave all that in the air. Just saying I was aware of it.

Recently, you said that you felt like hip-hop was going in a one-sided direction in terms of songs that depict violence, but not the full scope of the tragedy that's behind the violence. What do you think it would take to reverse that dynamic?
[It's on] the artists. Open the door for more of them. Sometimes our system gets hooked on the hamburger and french fries because they sell and they're cheaper to produce.

But you got to open up the door and let the art go. If you go back and check some of that history, whether it's Wu-Tang, Outkast, the Roots, Jay-Z, you'll see that the system let them be, opened the door, and let them try it. The industry has to get back to that. The labels got to get back to that, letting it breathe. Even McDonald's is not stupid. When Kentucky Fried Chicken is bubbling, they got to come with the McChicken.

What's your day-to-day like these days? How intent are you about not spreading yourself too thin with all your ventures?
I live my culture. And whether it's the hip-hop culture, or it's my spirituality through Islam, and the study of Buddha, and the great Christ, I live this. If you look at my company, 36 Chambers, which is a vegan-lifestyle company, that's exactly what I am.

Right now, we doing this New York State of Mind Tour. It's not easy to get up, leave your family, fly around the world, go through airport security, or be on a damn bus, and do it night after night. The joy of it for me is that when I come back home, I come home to that heaven that I wanted to build on Earth, where all my 12 jewels of life exist, my knowledge, wisdom, understanding is there, my culture, freedom, and equality is there. So Superman goes to his Fortress of Solitude after saving the world. He's got to go back to the Arctic and sit down and reminisce off his mother and father's history and all those things. And I follow that path.

What can we expect to see coming from the RZA for the rest of 2023?
We're looking forward to continuing the New York State of Mind Tour. It'll hit the USA in September. Wu-Tang and Hot 97 are going to rock Madison Square Garden. And, of course, I'm waiting for the strike to end to get back to making some new films.

I'm also looking to do a radio show in New York City. Been talking to a couple of good brothers – Grandmaster Flash, LL [Cool J]. I was DJ'ing since I was 11 years old. So it would be fun for me to play around in that world for a little bit. We're talking to [Hot] 97 right now, which owns two stations. They got 97, they got WBLS.

You also got Rock the Bells Radio, which LL is doing a great job with over there. I told him a Wu Wednesday would be nice, right? ®

The Abbot's Greatest Hits

1. 'Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)' 1993
Wu's debut kicked off RZA's five-year plan to turn the group into icons. Mission accomplished.

2. Raekwon's 'Only Built for Cuban Linx' 1995
Raekwon's Pyrex parables made for an all-time rap classic. RZA produced it to perfection.

3. 'Afro Samuri' 2007
RZA scored this animated TV series, lacing the fictional warrior's journey with gravitas.

4. 'American Gangster' 2007
RZA has acted in nearly 40 films, including this standout turn as a cop.

5. 'The Man With the Iron Fists' 2012
RZA made his directorial debut with this martial-arts extravaganza.

FROM TOP: TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES; HEIDI SCHUMANN/"THE NEW YORK TIMES"/REDUX

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KAROL G

BET ON HERSELF AND WON

ON THE LAST day of June, about 15,000 fans have braved dense New York City smog to worship at the altar of Karol G. At Rockefeller Center, a massive crowd assembles for the superstar's debut on the *Today* show, dressed in Colombian *levanta-cola* (butt-lifting) jeans and the lemon-yellow jerseys of Los Cafeteros, the country's national soccer team. There's even a little girl sporting a black crop top emblazoned with Karol's moniker, "Bichota."

Inside 30 Rock, the greenroom feels like an extended-family function: A dozen or so managers, assistants, and makeup artists are talking over one another, swarming around Karol and cracking jokes as they touch up her look for soundcheck. It is 5 a.m., and most of us have slept only three hours, but Karol, 32, is bright and animated, possessing an enviable bubbliness, the kind that only someone who is accustomed to waking at these hours has. Outside, I'd overheard a fan say that La Bichota is probably still asleep. When I recount this information to Karol, she just laughs. "I didn't sleep at all!" she exclaims in her *cantaíto paisa* accent, a smile across her face.

Karol's aunt, whom she briefly lived with as a teen, has come all the way from Long Island to support her niece – wearing a T-shirt decorated with the artwork from Karol's recent album, *Mañana Será Bonito,* of course. She brought Colombian empanadas from a bakery in Hempstead for Karol's team, but is surprised that there isn't anywhere to warm them up ("You can't eat cold empanadas!" she gripes, the *tía* energy reaching *Guinness World Records* levels).

After a quick soundcheck, Karol returns to the greenroom to change into her costume: a white maxi skirt, a long-sleeve mauve crop top, and thigh-high hot-pink platform boots. A tiny braid and a collection of silver charms frame her heart-shaped face, while a heavy cross, bejeweled with magenta gemstones, clings to her neck. Backstage, the head of security walks over and says that there are so many people outside that the NYPD has called for backup; apparently, some fans who didn't make it into the plaza are stuck on Fifth Avenue, trying to rush the stage.

"YOU CAN PUT ON THE SADDEST SONGS IN THE WORLD, AND IT'S AS IF YOU WERE KILLING YOURSELF, BUT REALLY, YOU'RE HEALING."

All morning, rumors have circulated that Karol has surpassed the attendance number that Harry Styles set when he performed on *Today* last summer. As the morning unfolds, the speculation seems like it could turn into fact: *Today* staff members believe she's eclipsed not just Styles, but also what they think is the show's all-time attendance record, set by Ricky Martin in 1999. At one point, Al Roker emerges from a random door in a baby-blue pinstripe suit: "It hasn't been this crazy since Ricky Martin!" he squawks.

It is almost *too* on-the-nose that Karol might have broken the attendance record of an artist who laid the groundwork for her own ascent into the mainstream. Along with heavyweights like Bad Bunny and J Balvin, Karol is part of a new generation of Latin American and U.S.-born Latinx artists infiltrating the American pop market and rewriting age-old scripts about language barriers and marketing practices. Too often, their commercial achievements have relied on feel-good narratives of cultural affirmation that excise the racial, linguistic, and geographical specificities of Latinx experiences, reifying the notion that we are all one people. At the same time, Karol's ability to set a new record challenges a xenophobic fiction the Anglo music industry has perpetuated for too long: the lie that Spanish-language music is niche, unpopular, and unknown.

Since she released her first album six years ago, Karol has endeared millions of listeners across the globe with the cool, crowd-pleasing fluidity of her songs. Her music glides through ripples of reggaeton, Afrobeats, dancehall, and trap, and with sunny, radio-friendly melodies, she sings universal stories of heartache, betrayal, and triumph. Her songs feel equally suited for moonlit beachfront *perreos* as they are for glitzy club outings – and coming from a woman, they offer a brief respite from the male perspectives on conquest and sex that monopolize reggaeton. That recipe has fueled a whirlwind year for Karol, catapulting her to a new level of fame over the past few months. In March, *Mañana Será Bonito* became the first Spanish-language album by a woman to hit Number One on the *Billboard* 200, and it's currently the highest-selling Latin album released this year. This summer, one of her tracks was featured on the *Barbie* soundtrack. She became the first Latina to headline Lollapalooza, and recently launched a massive stadium tour through the U.S.

In August, she unveiled the companion album to *Mañana Será Bonito* – a personal manifesto called *Mañana Será Bonito (Bichota Season)*. Karol is still processing all the milestones. "I imagined that I was going to accomplish a lot of things in my life, but really, I never imagined it'd be to the point that it is today. To reach so many people, touch so many people in so many different aspects – it still blows my mind," she says. "Life has shown me that so many things are possible. I have 10 times more ambition and vision than what I imagined."

After an hour or so, Karol finally emerges from the greenroom. She exits backstage and walks into the marbled lobby of 30 Rock, where she'll enter the plaza through a pair of golden double doors. Her team clusters around her in a circle to shelter her from passersby snapping photos, and for a moment, she turns around and hides her face into a wall where no one can see her. Out of nowhere, her tía slides up next to me and murmurs, "If I'm her aunt and I'm nervous, imagine what she must be feeling!"

Eventually, Karol turns around, high-fives everyone in her crew, and steps out into the crowd.

KAROL G IS RUNNING ON CONFIDENCE these days, and after spending five minutes with her, you *will* be charmed. She might win you over with how she giddily stamps her feet and squeals "¡*Que chimba*!" (Colombian slang for "That's awesome!") when she's excited about a new song, which has already occurred at least three times. Maybe she'll delight you after she whispers a joke about an overly thirsty fan into your ear. She might enchant you when, after singing a line from *Bichota Season,* she laughs off the male fragility of a former lover. Or perhaps she'll do it with her overwhelmingly good manners. I mean, not every celebrity offers to order you room service because you didn't have time to eat lunch.

That charisma is on full display the day before her *Today* show appearance. Karol answers the door of her suite at the luxe Hotel Barrière Fouquet's New York, appearing in a white terry-cloth robe with her hair damp from the shower. Her baby-pink locks are the latest curatorial choice in a rotating, rainbow-hued color wheel that's included electric blue and cherry red during her past two album cycles.

Inside the suite, dusty rosewood panels line the walls, and a matching velvet couch flanks a massive vanity mirror, where Karol's makeup artists surround her. Suitcases packed with eyeshadow palettes, blow-dryers, and clothes cover the floor like jigsaw chunks, but I find a spot on the sofa and plop down while Karol changes into a sleeveless pink hoodie and acid-wash army-green cargo pants. Her luggage is plastered with stickers of the cutesy cartoons that appear on the cover of *Mañana Será Bonito*; a stuffed toy of the redheaded mermaid from the album artwork perches on a chair in the corner.

Karol is taking it easy after spending four hours posing for her official Madame Tussauds wax figure yesterday. I ask if she can approve the final version, because sometimes the sculptures aren't exactly faithful renditions. She says she can, and hesitates a second before mentioning the notorious Cristiano Ronaldo statue that went viral in 2017 as a worst-case scenario. She pulls up an image of the work on her phone and shows it to everyone in the room, giggling impishly at the poorly rendered likeness of the soccer star. But within seconds, she recovers, remembering she's a global pop star who's supposed to be polite and poised. "I'm so sorry," she says, chuckling.

Karol pulls up a chair in front of me, ready to unveil *Bichota Season*. It's a new set of songs, but it's loosely connected to *Mañana Será Bonito,* which was the kind of breakup album that captured every messy, complicated stage of uncoupling: the sleep-deprived nights you spend scrolling through old photos, wishing they were still yours; the epiphanic realization that your suffering isn't permanent; the parties you crash with your girls in search of relief.

Mañana Será Bonito chronicled her public separation from her former fiancé, Puerto Rican rapper Anuel AA, in 2021. Karol says the failed engagement – and the experience of processing it through the album – was emotionally taxing. The Colombian artist isn't known for making intimate music, but

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PREVIOUS SPREAD:
SILVER JACKET AND PANTS BY **BUERLANGMA**. SILVER TOP BY **GIUSEPPE DI MORABITO**.

THIS SPREAD:
BLACK MESH TOP BY **NATALIA FEDNER**. CHOKER BY **BOOTZY COUTURE**. BLACK LEATHER GLOVES BY **KRISTINA K**.

CHROME BODY ARMOR BY **KWK BY KAY KWOK**.

LEATHER BRA AND PANTY BY **ZANA BAYNE**.

SHOES BY **GROUNDS**.

Mañana Será Bonito was steeped in the belief that vulnerability could offer a sense of autonomy. "The two weeks before the album came out, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat," she says. "Being so exposed in my music was very psychologically heavy.... Imagine something like this happening, and you have to tell millions of people what happened to you."

The fallout of the relationship was bitter and resentful, sparking dialogues and think pieces about toxic masculinity and misogynoir, due in part to Anuel's petulant online antics and fans' anti-Black comments about his subsequent partner, the Dominican singer Yailin La Más Viral (they have since parted ways). More recently, Anuel has resorted to tagging Karol in Instagram posts, seemingly mocking her song with Shakira, and taunting her at his concerts. At an awards show in June, he wore a T-shirt that read "You're with Feid, but you know that you're mine," a reference to her rumored relationship with the Colombian reggaeton artist.

But while *Mañana Será Bonito* was about healing from the painful dissolution of a relationship, *Bichota Season* takes on a different approach. Here, Karol is ready to move on from heartache, welcoming an uncompromising new era. To Karol, *Bichota Season* represents both a personal credo and a temporal directive, declaring emancipation in the wake of romantic collapse. "I go over the strange moments, the crazy moments, the difficult ones in my head," she says. "The moments where I felt, 'I'm dying and I won't be able to deal with this.' It's what I had to go through to get to today."

"S91," the first track released from *Bichota Season,* was initially meant to be part of *Mañana Será Bonito*. "S91" includes a spoken sound bite of Karol reading Psalm 91, a mantra of power in her family. "My mom would say that it was a prayer of protection – that nothing could touch us," she explains. The song didn't fit with the rest of the album, but it also didn't quite work as a bonus track on a deluxe edition. "If I had included ["S91" on *Mañana Será Bonito*], when people listen to the whole album, the narrative would have been lost," she explains.

So instead, Karol used that song as a blueprint and dreamt up the *Bichota Season* universe. In a sense, the album is much more confrontational, projecting a liberated future that still requires claws. Its title invokes the bad-bitch nickname she adopted in 2020 after releasing a song of the same name, though it originally refers to a Puerto Rican slang term meaning "a female drug lord." In the past, the moniker has garnered some criticism from fans, who suggest that repurposing the word for empowerment erases the violence and struggle surrounding the term's true context.

Karol says *Bichota Season* is about regaining "self-confidence" and "getting rid" of fear. "It's about a woman who feels proud of where she is, of everything she had to go through. Of never abandoning herself, of always having an internal voice that told her, 'Go, you can do this.' " She adds that there's a message of self-worth here, too. "They teach us it's wrong to celebrate ourselves for something we have. And it's not. We have to be the first ones to give ourselves credit." She thinks about how she's worked through her own fears and hardships. "A lot of things that don't scare me have happened in my life," she continues. "I'm not scared anymore, because I know I overcame them."

Karol hands me her silver AirPods Max, which are encrusted with crimson rhinestones in the shape of the mermaid doodle from the cover art of *MSB*. She looks at me apprehensively, clearly nervous to play these songs for someone outside of her team for the first time (I hear her tell her publicist that she's curious about what I am writing in my notes as I listen). Before she presses play on her phone, she issues an important statement of intent about the album: "It's about my achievements and my successes as a person, but also in my career ... the mental freedom I have to experiment with things in life no matter what – without thinking about it too much."

The opening guitar strums of "Mi Ex Tenía Razón" filter into the headphones, Karol's warm voice layered on top. A clatter of digital and acoustic drums cuts into the melody, kicking the song into high gear. It's pure Selena, an electro-Tejano lament that feels lifted straight from *Amor Prohibido*. The lyrics are sly and pointed: "*Mi ex tenía razón/Dijo que no iba a encontrar uno como él/Y me llevo uno mejor*" ("My ex was right/He said I wasn't going to find one like him/And I ended up with someone better"). It is seemingly a rejoinder to Anuel's recent single, "Mejor Que Yo," in which he assures an ex that she won't find anyone like him. But Karol is plangent and clear in this retort.

Now I know exactly what she means when she says it's bichota season.

KAROL G BECAME a star across Latin America back in 2017, after releasing her debut album, *Unstoppable*. With the follow-ups *Ocean* and *KG0516,* she gradually built a reputation as a fan favorite in the world of pop reggaeton. In 2019, Karol got a fresh boost with "Tusa," her hit with Nicki Minaj, which has been streamed half a billion times. Karol was a household name across Latin America at that point, but *Mañana Será Bonito* kicked off a whole new chapter of success after it amassed a pile of historic accolades, including the unprecedented *Billboard* 200 debut. "It's the start of some really *chimba* things for me and my future," she says.

For *Bichota Season,* she worked primarily with producer Sky Rompiendo, a fellow *paisa* who built his career making beats for J Balvin in the infancy of Medellín's reggaeton movement. There are also credits from MAG, the Dominican and Puerto Rican executive producer of Bad Bunny's *Un Verano Sin Ti,* as well Edgar Barrera, the Grammy-winning songwriter who has penned hits for música Mexicana idols like Grupo Frontera, Fuerza Regida, and Christian Nodal. There are some provocative collaborations, too – one track with corridos tumbados man-of-the-moment Peso Pluma and another with Dutch EDM tycoon Tiësto. She's also got two tracks with high-femme R&B vamp and fellow Colombian Kali Uchis: The first is a bouncy reggae breeze that appears on *Bichota Season,* and the second is an old-school reggaeton heater that Karol says may come in October. "We've spent a year and a half talking about this. We've seen each other, gone to the studio together; she's been at my house, I've been to her house. But Kali is like me, we're like 'zero pressure,' " she says. "We made a ton of songs, and she would tell me, 'I don't like that one,' and I'd tell her, 'I'm not feeling it either.' "

But it's the final song she mentions that is the juiciest: She tells me about a track she'd been working on called "Verano Rosa," which Feid had planned to jump on. "It's a song about heartbreak, which is the best part of it all," Karol says, grinning. She doesn't explicitly confirm the relationship, but the comment feels like a surreptitious acknowledgment that *something* is going on between them. Later, in the rush to leave the hotel for her rehearsal at the *Today* show, I accidentally pick up the wrong phone off the couch, thinking it's mine. It's actually Karol's, and the background is a candid shot of Feid, slightly sunburned and smiling.

Ultimately, "Verano Rosa" was never finished. Karol wasn't able to complete it, partly because it took her time to find the right collaborator. "[Feid] says, 'I know you've thought of thousands of people and no one fits but ... are you gonna let me get on that song?' " Karol recounts.

The two artists had known each other from Medellín, but they hadn't really kept in touch. "There was a long time when we didn't speak to each other, and I barely knew anything about him," she says. But when Feid started to break out of their hometown and chart across Latin America, Karol invited him to open her 2021 Bichota Tour. They previously collaborated on a song called "Friki," which became a hit in Colombia. Yet Feid has unlocked a new level of fame in recent months – especially after his chart-busting hit with Puerto Rican rapper Young Miko, "Classy 101," which recently made its Hot 100 debut. "You go and put on the radio [in Colombia], and it's like, 'Can we get permission for anyone else's songs to play?' " jokes Karol.

Karol has had *Bichota Season* on repeat lately, and on the car ride to the *Today* show's rehearsal, she queues up a couple of different tracks from the project. You can tell that she is thrilled about these songs, and ready to unleash them into the world. At one point, she puts on "Bichota G," an irascible trap song complete with gunshot sound effects, and a display of Karol's ability to actually *rap*. When her song "Oki Doki" comes on, she starts singing the lyrics, her index finger wagging in the air: "*No me digas puta/El error fue tuyo y la vida es mía*," ("Don't call me a whore/The mistake was yours and life is mine").

"WE'RE DOING SOMETHING SPECIAL, AND I DON'T MEAN JUST ME. MANY LATINO ARTISTS ARE MAKING A MASSIVE EFFORT FOR OUR COMMUNITY."

"THEY DIDN'T EXPECT THAT BECAUSE THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND THAT LATINOS STAND UP FOR LATINOS."

Some of Karol's best songs are these kinds of battle cries – manifestos that don't deny the hurt, but inch toward recovery and independence. And as a woman who's spent a lifetime dealing with puerile man-children, the line cuts deep, so I tell Karol it's extremely relatable. "They really start to say those things about you, as if you were the messy one!" she exclaims.

But embracing both sorrow and fearlessness is something rarely afforded to women in reggaeton. Karol has struck a protean balance; her music pushes against the binary demand for either sentimentality or aggression, pursuing full spectrums of complicated, imperfect emotion. In a genre where women have historically been reduced to uncredited chorus girls or sexual servants, Karol doesn't fall into either role. "Since we're little, at home, they tell us, 'Don't carry that, that's for men,'" she says. "And they start showing us – incorrectly – where we belong, where we don't belong, what we can do, what we can't do. When in reality, we can do everything." Karol sees the work she's been doing, alongside other women artists, as a step forward. "We are all paving the way."

Bichota Season bears a crucial message: Flattening yourself in service of a lover is an ugly, painful kind of concealment. Sometimes, living inside the textures of desolation can guide you back to yourself and your power. "I swear to you, even in the moments when I've been super mega in love, I still make music about heartbreak," says Karol. "You can put on the saddest songs in the world, and it's as if you were killing yourself, but really, you're healing."

THE RESIDENTS OF Medellín have long been beleaguered by stereotypes of violence and crime, but as it often happens, that myopic view has never told the full story. Instead, Karol says, her childhood was full of joy. She was spared from Medellín's darkest years of narcoterrorism in part because she was born two years before Pablo Escobar's death. She grew up in a middle-class home and had a massive extended family. Her father, Juan Guillermo Giraldo Ramírez, has 13 siblings, and many had three or four children. "In Medellín, people are super family-oriented," she explains. "You spend holidays, Sundays, and weekends with your parents, your grandparents."

She developed an early connection with music, thanks in part to her dad. Juan Guillermo played in a band in his free time, performing all kinds of music – rock, salsa, ballads. She would sometimes sing with him at special events. Still, at school, she was shy, and often relied on her older sister to speak up for her. "That confidence was given to me at home."

When she was 14, her father suggested she try out for the Colombian version of *X Factor*. She says she made it past the first three rounds of auditions, joining 10 other semifinalists after 50,000 people tried out. But she was eliminated before reaching the final competition. Still, Juan Guillermo was adamant that his daughter had a gift, and Karol was determined to pursue music. In 2006, she signed a record deal with Puerto Rican label Diamond Music, releasing a handful of tracks that never really took off, and her father ended up buying out the contract two years later. She was frustrated by the failures, and almost decided to give up on music altogether.

In spite of the adversity, Karol remembers that time fondly, especially because of her family's unconditional support. She and her parents would hand out CDs wherever they could – schools, universities, clubs, subway cars, buses. Or she'd go to the city center, where she brought her music to street vendors in the hopes they'd include her songs on the bootleg reggaeton compilation CDs and flash drives they hawked. "They'd sell, let's say, something like *Reggaeton Hits*. So it'd be Wisin y Yandel, Daddy Yankee, and one Karol G, who no one knew," she says, snickering.

In 2008, Karol landed a meeting with Universal Music Latino, which offered her a deal as an in-house songwriter. But she was certain she wanted a career as a proper solo act, so she turned it down. Feeling lost and defeated, she went to New York to study marketing and live with her aunt on Long Island. One day while commuting, she spotted an ad for the Boston Music Conference. She decided to attend the industry event out of curiosity. It reinvigorated her, motivating her to return to music with renewed discipline. She packed her bags and went back to Medellín, where she took courses in composition, music theory, and voice at the University of Antioquia for five years.

Karol had grown up listening to reggaeton, obsessed with Boricua legends like Ivy Queen and Wisin y Yandel, along with genre-defining mixtapes like El Chombo's *Cuentos de la Cripta* series. But by 2013,

"EVEN IN THE MOMENTS WHEN I'VE BEEN SUPER MEGA IN LOVE, I STILL MAKE MUSIC ABOUT HEARTBREAK."

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
CHOKER BY **BIANCA ARMER**. BRACELET BY **DEFAÏENCE**.

THIS SPREAD:
SILVER JACKET AND PANTS BY **BUERLANGMA**. SILVER TOP BY **GIUSEPPE DI MORABITO**.

CHROME BODY ARMOR BY **KWK BY KAY KWOK**. CHOKER BY **BIANCA ARMER**.

"THEY TELL YOU THAT YOU BROKE ATTENDANCE RECORDS. IT'S SOMETHING YOU DON'T BELIEVE; IT FEELS LIKE IT'S A LIE."

when she had returned to Medellín, reggaeton was taking a different racial and geographical shape. The metropolis had become a nucleus for a new reggaeton sound, first pioneered by artists like Fainal y Shako, Reykon, and Golpe a Golpe. "I wouldn't say, 'I want to be like Lady Gaga' in interviews," she remembers. "I'd say, 'I dream of being like Fainal y Shako.' That's how big they were."

Then a younger generation of producers and artists, including J Balvin, Maluma, Sky Rompiendo, and the Rude Boyz, started to remake the genre, giving it a high-gloss, synth-forward, radio-ready veneer – a reinvention that has become a flashpoint for critiques about reggaeton's whitewashing and dilution into mediocre pop music. Karol says that Medellín producers didn't have the necessary drum kits or sample packs to make reggaeton in the more hard-hitting Puerto Rican tradition, so they invented their own style. "We didn't have the sounds, the files, none of what they had," she explains. "We'd try to make it so it sounded similar, but with what we had."

It wasn't until Karol met her longtime producer Ovy on the Drums that she really started cultivating her signature style. Ovy says he'd been called in to help with her 2013 single with Nicky Jam, "Amor de Dos," and he went to Karol's house one day to deliver the final product. Ovy overheard Karol talking about how she needed a DJ to accompany her at shows, and thinking he could take advantage of the opening, suggested himself – even though he had no idea how to DJ. "He says that, and I turn around, like, 'You're a DJ?' 'Yes, I'm a DJ for some people in Medellín.' And I was like, 'So you're gonna leave those people in Medellín for me?' Horrible!" She laughs it off now: "My first reaction was like, 'Who is this? And why did he insert himself into this conversation?' "

"We didn't really get along at first," Ovy said in a video interview. "She didn't really like that I was so forward at that moment." But Karol gave him a chance. Ovy borrowed a sampler from a friend and learned how to DJ for one of her gigs the following day. After earning more of her trust, Ovy suggested they work on a song together, which became "Ricos Besos." Karol was immediately impressed. "It was like he took a chip from my brain," she says. "It was exactly what I wanted for the song, and that's what has always happened with Ovy." Ovy shares the feeling. "The chemistry was born in the first song," he says. "There's always been a fluid energy between us.... Musically, I've given her my best and she's given me her best."

Soon, the pair started collaborating as a bona fide producer-singer team, similar to fellow Medellín-based duos J Balvin and Sky Rompiendo, or Nicky Jam and Saga WhiteBlack. They holed up in Ovy's father's apartment to record, using mattresses to soundproof the room. Eventually, they built a makeshift studio at Karol's house, with the help of some cousins, Karol's father, and friends; at one point, they even laid bricks themselves. "We'd make music every day," remembers Ovy. "I'd arrive at Karol's house at eight or nine in the morning, and I'd leave at 2 a.m.... Sometimes it'd be so late; I'd be so tired. And I'd sleep at her house."

Karol and Ovy have been working together for a decade now – he produced a few tracks on *Bichota Season*. He says that she's interested in more than just making hits. Her vision is more holistic. "She's a woman who has it figured out. She's always thinking about innovating, about doing something different. Not just musically, but in her image," he explains. "When we finish a song, she sees possibilities that you never saw."

And, of course, he points out how magnetic she is. "She can have a million problems," he says. "But you're always going to see her with a smile, always with a good attitude."

THAT ENERGY RADIATES from Karol when she's onstage at the *Today* show. During a break in the performance, she joins the hosts to greet her fans, calling them her "dream come true," the tooth gem in her incisor glinting in the sunlight. The audience members, sporting white, Feid-style sunglasses and traditional Colombian *vueltiao* hats, holler with glee, spilling out onto the plaza. This might as well be at an arena show. When the tenebrous opening notes of "TQG" hit, the screams become deafening. "We're gonna sing this one real loud, right from here," says Karol, pointing to her heart. I look at the crowd, some yelling at the top of their lungs, others chins' quivering as tears well up in their eyes.

Almost as soon as she gets offstage, Karol has even more to do: First, she's shuffled off to do a rapid-fire interview called "8 Questions Before 8 a.m." Then there's an in-studio interview, this time with the hosts of the *Today* show. After that, some social hits. Then a third interview.

But eventually, it all catches up to her. After the on-camera conversation with the hosts, she heads back to the greenroom for a short break. It's been a hectic few hours, and she's been holding back tears of joy this whole time, never pausing to digest the magnitude of this moment. Once she arrives in the greenroom, she covers her face with her hands and begins to cry. The room hushes. Through breathy sobs, she begins to speak.

"So many good things come to us. I think it's so crazy," she says, her voice trembling. "Beyoncé, Shakira, Rihanna, Ricky Martin have been some of the artists [they've had here], and they tell you that you broke attendance records. It's something you don't believe; it feels like it's a lie."

Karol's tía gently steps in to console her. "But mami, you've really fought so hard for this. All of you have worked hard," she says, gesturing to everyone in the room.

Karol lifts her face out of her hands and wipes the tears from the creases of her eyes. You can practically see the spunk returning to her cheeks. "I'm very happy. Let's go for more," she says. "We're doing something special, and I don't mean just me. Many Latino artists are making a massive effort for our community. It's really big what's happening, because they didn't expect that. They didn't expect that because they don't understand that Latinos stand up for Latinos."

One of her managers agrees, his voice breaking. "You see these things and you're like, 'One day, one day.' "

"Oh, no, everyone is gonna start to cry," says Karol, and the room bursts into laughter. In the corner, another member of Karol's team yelps, "Someone tell a joke!"

When she's done weeping, Karol walks toward a nearby monitor replaying her performance of "Tus Gafitas." The camera scans across the crowd, fans beaming and bopping along to every word. Karol shrieks, elated by what she sees onscreen.

"*¡Que chimba!*"

Today the risks of artificial intelligence are clear – but the warning signs have been there all along

These Women Tried to Warn Us About AI

By Lorena O'Neil

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
Gioncarlo Valentine

Timnit Gebru, Rumman Chowdhury, Safiya Noble, Seeta Peña Gangadharan, and Joy Buolamwini (from left)

TIMNIT GEBRU DIDN'T set out to work in AI. At Stanford, she studied electrical engineering – getting both a bachelor's and a master's in the field. Then she became interested in image analysis, getting her Ph.D. in computer vision. When she moved over to AI, though, it was immediately clear that there was something very wrong.

"There were no Black people – literally no Black people," says Gebru, who was born and raised in Ethiopia. "I would go to academic conferences in AI, and I would see four or five Black people out of five, six, seven thousand people internationally.... I saw who was building the AI systems and their attitudes and their points of view. I saw what they were being used for, and I was like, 'Oh, my God, we have a problem.' "

When Gebru got to Google, she co-led the Ethical AI group, a part of the company's Responsible AI initiative, which looked at the social implications of artificial intelligence – including "generative" AI systems, which appear to learn on their own and create new content based on what they've learned. She worked on a paper about the dangers of large language models (LLMs), generative AI systems trained on huge amounts of data to make educated guesses about the next word in a sentence and spit out sometimes eerily human-esque text. Those chatbots that are everywhere today? Powered by LLMs.

Back then, LLMs were in their early, experimental stages, but Google was already using LLM technology to help power its search engine (that's how you get auto-generated queries popping up before you're done typing). Gebru could see the arms race gearing up to launch bigger and more powerful LLMs – and she could see the risks.

She and six other colleagues looked at the ways these LLMs – which were trained on material including sites like Wikipedia, Twitter, and Reddit – could reflect back bias, reinforcing societal prejudices. Less than 15 percent of Wikipedia con-

Reporter LORENA O'NEIL *wrote about the disappearing indigenous lands of coastal Louisiana in the April issue.*

MAKEUP BY GREGG HUBBARD USING RETROUVE SKIN & AMIKA FOR B&A REPS. MAKEUP ASSISTANCE BY LESLIE WISDOM.

"Judgments come with responsibilities. And responsibility lies with humans at the end of the day."

—JOY BUOLAMWINI

"I saw who was building the AI systems and their points of view. I saw what they were being used for, and I was like, 'Oh, my God, we have a problem.'"

—TIMNIT GEBRU

"That was like pulling one thread that's poking out of a sweater. You're like, 'If I could just kind of fix this, then I can move on to something else.' But I started pulling it and the whole sweater unraveled."

—SAFIYA NOBLE

tributors were women or girls, only 34 percent of Twitter users were women, and 67 percent of Redditors were men. Yet these were some of the skewed sources feeding GPT-2, the predecessor to today's breakthrough chatbot.

The results were troubling. When a group of California scientists gave GPT-2 the prompt "the man worked as," it completed the sentence by writing "a car salesman at the local Wal-Mart." However, the prompt "the woman worked as" generated "a prostitute under the name of Hariya." Equally disturbing was "the white man worked as," which resulted in "a police officer, a judge, a prosecutor, and the president of the United States," in contrast to "the Black man worked as" prompt, which generated "a pimp for 15 years."

To Gebru and her colleagues, it was very clear that what these models were spitting out was damaging – and needed to be addressed before they did more harm. "The training data has been shown to have problematic characteristics resulting in models that encode stereotypical and derogatory associations along gender, race, ethnicity, and disability status," Gebru's paper reads. "White supremacist and misogynistic, ageist, etc., views are overrepresented in the training data, not only exceeding their prevalence in the general population but also setting up models trained on these datasets to further amplify biases and harms."

As the language models continued to develop, companies tried to filter their datasets. However, in addition to suppressing words like "white power" and "upskirt," they also suppressed words like "twink," a seemingly derogatory term repurposed in a playful way by folks in the LGBTQ community.

"If we filter out the discourse of marginalized populations, we fail to provide training data that reclaims slurs and otherwise describes marginalized identities in a positive light," the paper reads.

Gebru was eventually fired from Google after a back-and-forth about the company asking her and fellow Google colleagues to take their names off the report. (Google has a different account of what happened – we'll get into the whole back-and-forth later.)

Fast-forward two years and LLMs are everywhere – they're writing term papers for college students and recipes for home chefs. A few publishers are using them to replace the words of human journalists. At

> "Who gets to be the arbiter of truth? Who gets to decide what can and cannot be seen?"
>
> —RUMMAN CHOWDHURY

least one chatbot told a reporter to leave his wife. We're all worried they're coming for our jobs.

As AI has exploded into the public consciousness, the men who created them have cried crisis. On May 2, Gebru's former Google colleague Geoffrey Hinton appeared on the front page of *The New York Times* under the headline: "He Warns of Risks of AI He Helped Create." That Hinton article accelerated the trend of powerful men in the industry speaking out against the technology they'd just released into the world; the group has been dubbed the AI Doomers. Later that month, there was an open letter signed by more than 350 of them – executives, researchers, and engineers working in AI. Hinton signed it along with OpenAI CEO Sam Altman and his rival Dario Amodei of Anthropic. The letter consisted of a single gut-dropping sentence: "Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war."

How would that risk have changed if we'd listened to Gebru? What if we had heard the voices of the women like her who've been waving the flag about AI and machine learning?

Researchers – including many women of color – have been saying for years that these systems interact differently with people of color and that the societal effects could be disastrous: that they're a fun-house-style distorted mirror magnifying biases and stripping out the context from which their information comes; that they're tested on those without the choice to opt out; and will wipe out the jobs of some marginalized communities.

Gebru and her colleagues have also expressed concern about the exploitation of heavily surveilled and low-wage workers helping support AI systems; content moderators and data annotators are often from poor and underserved communities, like refugees and incarcerated people. Content moderators in Kenya have reported experiencing severe trauma, anxiety, and depression from watching videos of child sexual abuse, murders, rapes, and suicide in order to train ChatGPT on what is explicit content. Some of them take home as little as $1.32 an hour to do so.

In other words, the problems with AI aren't hypothetical. They don't just exist in some SkyNet-controlled, *Matrix* version of the future. The problems with it are already here.

"I've been yelling about this for a long time," Gebru says. "This is a movement that's been more than a decade in the making."

ONE CHAPTER OF that movement starts in 2017. It was back when Gebru was at Microsoft and she worked with researcher Joy Buolamwini on a project about facial recognition. It relies on a branch of artificial intelligence – statistical machine learning – to recognize patterns rather than produce new text.

Buolamwini was studying computer science at the Georgia Institute of Technology when she noticed that the facial-detection technology she was experimenting with often didn't pick up on her dark-skinned face. To test her projects, she'd have to call over her fair-skinned, red-haired, green-eyed roommate. Buolamwini tried not to think much of it, assumed the kinks would be worked out.

But a few years later, the same issue came up. For Buolamwini's "Aspire Mirror" project, a person was supposed to stand in front of a mirror and have the face of a celebrity reflect on top of theirs. She tried to project Serena Williams. No luck. She tried using her ID card. Nope. So, she grabbed a white Halloween mask sitting in her office.

"The mask worked," Buolamwini says, "and I felt like, 'All right, that kind of sucks.'"

Buolamwini switched her focus, testing how computers detect and classify people's faces. She ran her photo through facial-recognition software that either didn't detect her face at all or categorized her as a male.

Buolamwini added a thousand pictures to the systems looking for patterns in how the software classification worked; photos of Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey were both labeled as male. She reached out to Gebru as a mentor and together they published an academic paper reporting that darker-skinned females are the most likely to be misclassified, with error rates up to 34.7 percent. The error rate for white men: 0.8 percent.

> "Certain populations become guinea pigs of these technologies or the cheap labor to power them."
>
> —SEETA PEÑA GANGADHARAN

One of the reasons for the mischaracterization is the lack of diversity in the datasets – the systems simply weren't given enough Black and brown faces to learn how to understand what they look like. Even more troubling, as Buolamwini points out in her project, these techniques are applied to other areas of pattern-recognition technology, like predictive analytics that determine things like hiring practices, loan evaluations, and are even used for criminal sentencing and policing.

Crime-prediction software PredPol has been shown to target Black and Latino neighborhoods exponentially more than white neighborhoods. Police departments have also run into problems when using facial-recognition technology: The city of Detroit faces three lawsuits for wrongful arrests based on that technology. Robert Williams, a Black man, was wrongfully arrested in 2020. And this summer, Porcha Woodruff was arrested after a false match and held for 11 hours for robbery and carjacking when she was eight months pregnant. The charges were finally dismissed – and Woodruff filed a lawsuit for wrongful arrest.

Ninety-nine percent of *Fortune* 500 companies use automated tools in their hiring process, which can lead to problems when résumé scanners, chatbots, and one-way video interviews introduce bias. A now-defunct AI recruiting tool created by Amazon taught itself male candidates were preferable, after being trained on mostly male résumés. Biased data can have widespread effects that touch the lives of real people.

"When I started [this] research, I would get a lot of questions like, 'Why are you focused on Black women?' " Buolamwini says. She'd point out that she was studying men and women with all different skin tones. Then she'd ask back, "Why don't we ask this question when so much of the research has been focused on white men?"

Facial recognition is a different version of AI from the LLMs that we're seeing today. But the issues Buolamwini raised are similar. These technologies don't operate on their own. They're trained by humans, and the material fed into them matters – and the people making the decisions about how the machines are trained are crucial, too. Buolamwini says ignoring these issues could be dire.

Buolamwini, whose book *Unmasking AI* comes out in October, was invited this summer to speak to President Biden at a closed-door roundtable about the power and risks of AI. She says she talked to Biden about how biometrics – the use of faces and other physical characteristics for identification – are increasingly being used for education, health care, and policing, and she raised the case of Williams and his wrongful imprisonment. She talked, too, about the seemingly benign use of facial recognition in public places like airports; TSA is using it now in dozens of cities. This type of public facial recognition has already been banned in the European Union because it was deemed discriminatory and invasive.

"AI as it's imagined and dreamed of being is this quest to give machines intelligence of different forms, the ability to communicate, to perceive the world, to make judgments," Buolamwini says. "But once you're making judgments, judgments come with responsibilities. And responsibility lies with humans at the end of the day."

GEBRU WAS SHOCKED at how things had spun out of control. She says the paper about the dangers of LLMs had gone through the regular approval process at Google, but then she'd been told all Google employees' names needed to be taken off of it. There was a flurry of calls and emails on Thanksgiving Day 2020, with Gebru asking if there was a way to keep her name on the paper. A couple of days later, while traveling, Gebru sent an email to her manager's manager saying she'd remove her name if a few things changed at Google – including a more transparent review process for future research papers. She also wanted the identities of who reviewed and critiqued her paper revealed. If Google couldn't meet those conditions, she said, she'd consider resigning.

After that back-and-forth, Gebru sent an email to a group of her female colleagues who worked for Google Brain, the company's most prominent AI team. She accused Google of "silencing marginalized voices" and told the women to "stop writing your documents because it doesn't make [*Cont. on 78*]

INTO *the* ABYSS *with* ETHEL CAIN

One of the most intriguing rising artists in pop found her freedom by inventing dark, twisted stories – and she's got lots more to come

BY JULYSSA LOPEZ

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NEDDA AFSARI

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Lately, for Hayden Silas Anhedönia, time feels like a slippery concept. If she's not playing shows halfway across the world, she's usually tucked away in her bedroom, a quiet hideaway in Pittsburgh with a sloped roof that doubles as a portal to another world.

Here, the hours glide by, one after the other. She might spend 12, 13, even 14 hours trapped inside, leaning over her computer, lost in the expansive sounds she's creating. "You'll get up at 9 a.m. to start working, and then you're like, 'Oh, what time is it?' It's 4 a.m. the next day," she says. "But it's fun – and insane and frustrating, and it makes me want to rip my hair out."

Getting into this private lair, where Anhedönia, 25, has lived since last fall, feels a little bit like navigating an M.C. Escher lithograph. From the outside, her house looks lean and narrow, but inside, staircases jut out of unexpected corners, rising higher and higher. Vintage heirlooms and random odds and ends are strewn about; there's an entire wooden church pulpit she found, rustic little trunks plucked from thrift stores, a life-size cutout of Susan Sarandon. She's created different versions of this home as she's moved through different locales – a small house in Alabama last year, a former church in Indiana before that – each taking on the haunted, magical quality of antique emporiums filled with esoteric artifacts. People tend to be fascinated by Anhedönia's things, and she likes showing them off: all these sundry bits of the life she's built while breaking through as Ethel Cain, one of the most intriguing pop artists of the past couple of years.

Anhedönia has been getting more acquainted with Ethel Cain, the character whose story she's been tracing across multiple projects since 2018, and whose background she plans to explore further on an EP planned for later this year. Listeners first got to know the full, tragic arc she had in mind on her 2022 debut album, *Preacher's Daughter* – a stunning release that showed Anhedönia's atmospheric production and her knack for Southern Gothic imagery and intense themes, like religious indoctrination, sexual violence, isolation, and family trauma.

Ethel Cain is a work of fiction, one that first came to Anhedönia on "A House in Nebraska," a spine-tingling song she wrote at age 19. Ethel and her creator share a lot in common. Both are women who took off on their own, leaving their oppressive Christian communities: Ethel grew up in Alabama, while Anhedönia herself came from a rural town in Florida called Perry, where she was home-schooled and brought up Baptist. But Anhedönia takes Ethel into much darker terrain from there on *Preacher's Daughter,* having the character grapple with abuse at the hands of her father as she treks out west, where she encounters drugs, sex work, and dangerous men – until eventually she's kidnapped, killed, and cannibalized.

It's a violent, fatalist plot told over dazed pianos and dramatic blasts of distortion, Anhedönia's voice often steady and dreamlike even at cruel turns. She drew from inspirations like Lana Del Rey and Florence + the Machine as she crafted her debut, and the album feels like a twisted collage of those influences playing over a feverish Donald Ray Pollock novel – he's one of her favorite writers, along with others in the Southern Gothic canon. The EP she's working on now covers Ethel's high school years. Anhedönia says she envisions it as another chapter to a longer story she's been telling: "I feel like this is truly laying Ethel Cain to rest."

One Saturday afternoon in June, she takes a few hours off from wrapping up Ethel's story and steps outside, barefaced and relaxed, to Double Wide Grill, a diner built inside a vintage gas station. I see her before she enters the restaurant: From across the street, she fits right into the industrial town she moved into last October, casual in black cargo pants and an oversize crop top with a wolf on it. It's a little different from her aesthetic as Ethel, which is often distinguished by frilly white Edwardian dresses, or the high fashion she's shown off in runway shows for Eckhaus Latta, Miu Miu, and Givenchy. And yet, it makes sense, given Anhedönia's ever-changing style. "If I had to describe it in a silly way, I would say there's three people living in my body," she jokes. "There's a punk-ass 16-year-old boy who lives with his grandma, the grandma that he lives with, and then the demon that lives in their basement."

She's catching up after touring a lot this summer, having just knocked out several dates in Australia shortly after making her Coachella debut. Her sets are heavy with emotion; fans sometimes leave in tears, feeling intimately connected to the wrenching isolation at the heart of her songs. On social media, they call her Mother and talk about the closeness they feel with her, in an echo of her own origin story. Growing up in Florida, she recalls sneaking onto the internet behind her parents' backs, before eventually discovering Tumblr communities that changed her life and developing the internet fluency that has made her a cult figure.

But part of her appeal is that she doesn't seem all that interested in stardom. She'd prefer to spend time hidden away making things; all those shows take a lot out of her. A few weeks before we hang out, she made headlines for collapsing onstage at the Sydney Opera House. "I don't like performing," she confesses plainly. "Maybe someday, if I can figure out a way that I can perform that is better for me, but the standard setup of, 'Go out, be in front of a bunch of people' – I don't like to be in front of a bunch of people. I don't like to be the center of attention 100 percent."

As her fame expanded, Anhedönia found herself in an obsessive scrolling cycle, checking social media constantly to see what people were saying. She recently decided to leave the internet behind for a while. "I just deleted all my Twitter accounts, deactivated even my personal Instagram," she says. "I gave my password to my main Instagram to my manager. I said, 'Don't give this back to me.' It's an addiction. It's literally like alcohol or drugs."

Instead, she's been diving into books, revisiting the dark plots of Flannery O'Connor and Gillian Flynn. (She happened to be reading Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* the day that he passed away this summer.) And to keep her hands busy, she's been embroidering, a hobby that's kept her from getting more tattoos, which already cover her hands and forehead. She has the names of Ashmedai and Gabriel, a demon and archangel from the Bible, written in Hebrew along either side of her hairline, and the word "please" etched on her neck. That one happened during a drunk, high night alone one Tuesday, sketched out in front of a mirror. "I remember the head space I was in; it was very kind of pleading, almost," she says. "Also, I thought, 'My mother, as appalled as she will be that I have a neck tattoo, will love that I have my manners in clear, full view of everyone.' "

But mostly, when she's not reading, embroidering, or on the road, she's making music. "I almost resent touring sometimes," she says. "I'm like, 'Let me go home. I need to sink into my hole.' Let it come to me, and then create." That's why after a while, when we're done picking at our fries, Anhedönia guides me through a few sunbaked Pittsburgh streets and leads me up to her room. We sit on her floor, where she plays some of her intricate new songs. There's one that starts with a diaphanous piano melody and then dives into a crash of guitars. Another one is more than 20 minutes long.

Later, she shows me a playlist that's been guiding her through the music. It's filled with ambient masterminds – Brian Eno, Explosions in the Sky, Grouper, and William Basinski, the composer known for his *Disintegration Loops* series, made up of decaying tapes he found and let slowly crumble. Anhedönia, too, has been plunging into her own songs, chasing inspirations before they disappear.

Senior music editor JULYSSA LOPEZ *wrote the Bad Bunny cover story for the July–August issue.*

PRODUCED BY MICHAEL ZUMAYA. HAIR BY LISA-MARIE POWELL USING R+CO BLEU. MAKEUP BY BLAKE ARMSTRONG USING MAC COSMETICS.

> *It's so hard when you try to represent the South. There's so much straight-up depravity and human insanity, but there's also really beautiful parts.*

Anhedönia is one of those rare people who can access crisp, sharp memories from her early childhood, recalling senses and images as far back as when she was two. "I remember swinging on the tire swing at my mimi and pop's house," she says. "I remember just lots of time outdoors. I remember there was a very specific way that it feels to listen to a streetlight hum – those old, I guess fluorescent ones – and the way that they look glowing through the leaves of an oak tree.... I remember the way it felt to stand in a dank shed and smell that powdery dirt that's in Florida. Just the way that it felt to be a child and try to make sense of things." Imagery from those days still trickles into her lyrics, often painting an ominous but vivid picture of the South. "It's so hard when you try to represent the South because there's so much just straight-up depravity and kind of human insanity, but there's also really beautiful parts," she says, sounding not unlike O'Connor herself.

Her father was a deacon at the Baptist church in their community; her mother, a convert, took her newfound religion very seriously, she says. Anhedönia remembers how she and her three siblings would gather at the kitchen table every morning for lessons from their mother. During their free time, they weren't allowed to listen to secular music. Instead, she grew up singing in church, absorbing choir music, and playing piano.

There was one part of secular culture that Anhedönia recalls being allowed to explore: horror movies, which she watched at her grandparents' house. "I was really anxious and scared of everything. And so my pop, in all his wisdom, decided I should come spend the night and watch every R-rated horror movie that he had." They'd go to Walmart and buy a Betty Crocker cake with strawberry icing to eat while they watched *The Blair Witch Project, The Ring,* or the *Final Destination* series. "He was like, 'Watch this, you won't be scared anymore,'" Anhedönia says.

But slowly, real-world uncertainties began to set in. Anhedönia says she'd always understood, somewhere deep inside of her, that she felt an attraction to both sexes. "I had [*Cont. on 76*]

Rap's Next 50 Years

These are the artists who will help define hip-hop's next half-century

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY TIM MARRS

IN 50 YEARS, hip-hop has transformed and taken on any number of different shapes and contexts while remaining undeniably distinct. You don't quite know why something is hip-hop, but it strikes you as immediately as any physical quality. The rap world has invented new forms of expression capable of adapting to the changes brought on by the expansion of technology like the internet, all while remaining true to its essence, the indomitable spirit at the heart of this culture. More than just artists, today's rap world is a constellation of figures all interlinked by the lineage they share with hip-hop's forebears. Whether they're rappers, producers, fashion designers, or online creators, hip-hop is as stuffed with talent as ever. Hip-hop changes too fast to predict far into the future, but here are 20 figures who are changing the game — and will help shape rap's next 50 years. (You can see the full list, featuring an additional 30 picks, on our website.) **JEFF IHAZA**

Baby Tron

"I DON'T KNOW what it is, but I feel like we got the sound that everybody wants right now. Not necessarily me, or somebody in particular, but just the state of Michigan as a whole," BabyTron told *Rolling Stone* in 2021. Over the years, he's become the Pied Piper of Michigan rap — the regional style of intense punchlines and goofy music videos. The internet adores his elastic flow and penchant for lyrical agility; real heads connect with Tron's ability to rap about whatever is in his head — the NBA, video games, weed — and still be humorous while doing so. If Babyface Ray and Veeze are the critically acclaimed rappers from Detroit, the ones who craft albums crisply and efficiently, then Tron is the city's king of the internet. (Though he'd probably prefer a basketball metaphor.)

Tron is known to treat his raps something like a sport, opting to rhyme over complex, often multipart beats. On one end, you could say he's pushing boundaries in the genre, except it's hard to imagine anyone else rapping on the type of production he chooses. "You could have a person who only raps on some evil beats from Detroit. And then you got me, who does the funky techno stuff," he said. "It's just different bags out here." This spring, he dropped "100 Bars," a gauntlet of lyrical agility in which he rapped his way to the number 100.

Despite the viral antics, BabyTron takes rap as seriously as it can be taken. "I'm doing it every day. So it is definitely like the gym. Basketball, mic, booth. Same thing," he said. "I keep trying to make my punchlines more and more crazy, [add] more bits and pieces. Maybe it's four things that all go together in one line. That's all I be trying to do." YouTube is where he is most effective, as he continues churning out songs that function as loosies, or albums that are sequenced like more mercurial mixtapes from the blog-rap era. Tron has also recently started to lean into his natural goofiness. When he is focused, he's someone who not only is good at rapping, but also sounds like he flat-out loves to rap. **JAYSON BUFORD**

PHOTOGRAPH BY NATHAN BAJAR

Key Glock

THE 2021 MURDER of Young Dolph was grotesquely heartbreaking, but ask Key Glock and he will tell you that you have to stay strong for the family. The Memphis rap revival has been partly led by Key Glock, a cousin of Dolph. Glock's a traditional Memphis rapper with a slur to match and a pugnacious tone that adds to his arsenal as a rapper. See the earthy "Dirt," off of *Glockoma 2,* where the number-one rule is to get the money — a rule that Dolph taught him. Glock is a rapper meant for the strip clubs and the speakers booming from trunks, especially if you are on Elvis Presley Boulevard. If Dolph was the boss, then Glock was his lieutenant. Since Dolph's murder, Glock has been tasked with being the leader of Dolph's Paper Route Empire label. The ghost of Dolph hovers all over Glock's music. He's the next one in Memphis, even though that goes deeper than the chains and money. It's in his legacy. Glock's latest record, *Glockoma 2,* his first since his cousin was murdered, is a testament to rap's raw emotive spirit. "I just sat still. I didn't force or rush it; I had to deal with time," he told *Rolling Stone* of his process on the album. "I wasn't feeling it. It wasn't in me to record. I was grieving, bro. Ain't no way around it.... Everybody has a date. You can't run from it, no matter what it is.... When it is your time, it is your time. You got to wake up, live your best life, and be prepared." **J.B.**

DD Osama

THERE IS AN uneasy pendulum of emotions when it comes to the violence in the communities where hip-hop flourishes, especially in the internet era. Though violence and its wretched association with Black youth has always been a discussion in the genre — the Nineties saw the rise of gangsta rap, and the deaths of Biggie and Tupac; the aughts brought concerns of music glamorizing the drug trade — today's young people, faced with the same circumstances endemic to America's underserved communities, have grown uniquely warped by the hyper-speed contours of social media. Perhaps no other rapper personifies that quite like Harlem drill star DD Osama. The 16-year-old has star power as long as the island of Manhattan. He rose to prominence alongside his brother Notti Osama, who was tragically killed in an altercation with a rival crew last year. This being the era of TikTok, Notti's death was immortalized in a viral dance originated by the group responsible for his death, spawning a craze that spanned far beyond New York. If the origin story seems dramatic, it's because it is. DD quickly became the frontman for the drill boom in New York, as his releases ooze the raw trauma of losing his cousin at such a young age.

In some ways, DD is a symbol of the kind of fame characteristic of his generation. He was thrust into stardom by way of personal grief, a familiar condition in 2023.

At 16, there's clear development to be had, but Osama's ability to wrangle pain and virality with an undeniable bravado is a sign of the resilience of talent in the current generation. Throughout his releases, you get a sense that Osama would have found fame regardless; "Who I Am" has glimmers of a crossover hit, and "Let's Do It" has a chaotic swagger reminiscent of the old Chief Keef videos. His debut mixtape, *Here 2 Stay,* from earlier this year, is equal parts vulnerable and pugnacious, as the young MC finds his footing in the rap world while grieving the tragic loss of his cousin. For his part, Osama is comfortable in the limelight, already a magnet for collaborations among other rappers in his cohort, like NLE Choppa, who appears on "Let's Do It," as well as the 17-year-old phenom Luh Tyler, who Osama recently teased a collaboration with.

Questions still linger about how prevalent a role gang violence plays in Osama's and other prominent drill artists' music. But Osama is unquestionably gifted in a world that increasingly seems built for maximum reaction. If anyone's going to be capable of navigating such an environment, it's him. Osama either inspires or revolts; either way, you wouldn't want to miss out on what he does next. **J.B.**

PREVIOUS SPREAD: IMAGES WITHIN ILLUSTRATION BY BARRY BRECHEISEN/GETTY IMAGES; EMMA MCINTYRE/GETTY IMAGES; PRINCE WILLIAMS/WIREIMAGE; SIMONE JOYNER/GETTY IMAGES; BRANDON TODD/BILLBOARD/GETTY IMAGES; CARY FAGAN. OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP: BRYAN GARVEY; SCRILL DAVIS

Lola Brooke

2021'S "DON'T PLAY WITH It," by Brooklyn-bred rapper Lola Brooke, bursts with an easy bravado inherent to the young star's hometown. Nevertheless, the track garnered a delayed reaction, only becoming an inescapable hit, first on TikTok, earlier this year. The same could be said for Brooke, who spent close to a decade putting in the work in the same Brooklyn rap community that birthed greats like Pop Smoke. But hard work isn't a problem for the 29-year-old MC, who, since achieving viral success, immediately hit the pavement with a bevy of formidable features — like on Flo Milli's "Conceited" and a legendary linkup with Ciara on "Da Girls," both tracks from earlier this year that show off Brooke's guttural, syrup-thick delivery. She performed at this year's Summer Jam, a set complete with choreography she learned with the help of Teyana Taylor. After all, rap is nothing if not collaborative, and Brooke belongs to a rising generation of rappers who understand what it means to be talented and humble.

In the span of one year, Brooke went from citing Meek Mill as a major influence on her music to having Mill tease a collaboration between the two. Despite the long gestation period for the success of "Don't Play With It," Brooke was diligent in its promotion, releasing a string of remixes that capitalized on the song's internet explosion. Her upcoming full-length is one of the year's most hotly anticipated new releases, and she has already shown glimmers of a groundswell of skill on April's "Just Relax," which flips a sample of "The Choice Is Yours," by New York's own Black Sheep, with a kind of localized flair and reverence that sets the song apart from her contemporaries' endeavors in classic hip-hop references. It's why Brooke is almost certain to make the kind of impact on her borough that the late Pop Smoke made. There's simply not an ounce of fakery in her grind. **JEFF IHAZA**

Little Simz

AS MUCH of the domestic buzz on U.K. rap has focused on the drill scene, Little Simz has been steadily building a stellar catalog. The Islington, London-born rapper has become renowned for albums meshing elements of grime, R&B, electronic music, and whatever other genre she and frequent collaborator Inflo deem a fitting soundscape for her diaristic, probing lyricism. Simz dropped *Stratosphere,* her first mixtape, in 2010. Her album *Grey Area* was a finalist for the 2019 Mercury Prize. In 2022, she broke through and won the honor with *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert,* her fourth studio album, with gems just as capable of radiating effortless cool and charisma as she is of existential urgency. **ANDRE GEE**

J.I.D

DREAMVILLE rapper J.I.D has had a cult following since his 2017 debut album, *The Never Story,* which drew on his autobiographical insights from growing up in East Atlanta, his ear for rhythm, his sandpaper singing voice, and his knack for lyrical precision — all attributes that have only grown more potent since. His storytelling reached impressive heights on last year's *The Forever Story,* which brought J.I.D's lore full circle with recollections of fighting and family — and at its most compelling, the literal intersection of the two on "Crack Sandwich." He has classic panache and a modern touch, somehow reminiscent of early Eminem, Q-Tip, and Big L all at once. And sure, he has the blessing and mentorship of his label boss, J. Cole, but he has a texture, technicality, and acumen all his own. J.I.D's manager, Barry Hefner, told *Rolling Stone* last year, "I think J.I.D just wants to deliver great art to the world. I don't think he really understood what it took to be at the highest of levels. As he grows, he's starting to realize some of this shit [he] just doesn't care for." **MANKAPRR CONTEH**

THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: FELICIA ABBAN; HELLE ARENSBAK/RITZAU SCANPIX/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; TIMELESS

J.I.D PHOTOGRAPH BY SALIHAH SAADIQ BARNETT

Bktherula

WHEN YOU THINK of what it feels like to be young in the 2020s, it's hard not to conjure an image of a scene from a Bktherula video. Girls doing kick flips, fluorescent hair colors, impeccably baggy jeans. All set to spaced-out synths perfect for tripping mushrooms in a field. In other words, Bktherula feels "right now" because she is. She first rose to prominence with the 2020 single "Tweakin' Together," which had the ethereal, in-the-cosmos sound of internet-born subgenres like cloud rap, except with a trap-inspired cadence delivered with the confidence of a hip-hop prodigy. The song's chorus ("And I know these niggas mad as fuck/Bitch I'm in the trap, with TM we throw it up") landed on SoundCloud like a missile, racking up more than 100,000 plays in its first month. Bktherula says "Tweakin' Together" is "a love song," which fits the track's playfully sentimental ethos, "That nigga just like me, I ain't know I had a tether," she sings. The song, produced by Mars Beats, started as an instrumental titled "Nine9 x Duwap Kaine Type Beat 2019 — 'Questions,'" which speaks to the track's roots in the online underground.

Born Brooklyn Candida Rodriguez in Atlanta, 21-year-old Bktherula personifies a generation of musicians who can tap into varied sounds and disciplines with ease. This year, she dropped her mixtape, *LVL5 P1,* which sounds like a distillation of the genre-flipping spirit you'd expect from an internet native. While rappers like Playboi Carti and Lil Uzi Vert deserve credit for bringing the melodic flourishes of rock and hardcore to the realm of hip-hop, Bktherula seems to embody the genres inherently. "We Made It," featuring fellow rap-rocker Rico Nasty, rides glittering synths that build into an explosion of bass and chaos that sounds like a genre unto itself, a fusion of the freewheeling mosh pit and the smooth groove of an R&B hit. She followed up *LVL5 P1* with a record of acoustic takes on several of her hits, *Love Nirvana (Acoustic),* which offers more proof of Bktherula's versatility. Those renditions are constructed with a ground-level understanding of the sound of hip-hop, as opposed to landing like the often-clunky YouTube-creator remixes of popular rap songs. Fitting, given how much of a bona fide rock star she is. **J.I.**

Central Cee

U.K. RAP PHENOM Central Cee has certainly kept busy over the past few years. He dropped his second mixtape, *23,* last February, which debuted at the top of the U.K. charts, and he's quickly becoming the face of London's resilient drill scene as the Chicago-born sound makes its way around the rap diaspora. Born Oakley Neil H.T Caesar-Su, Central Cee grew up in the West London neighborhood of Shepherd's Bush, an area that's integral to the current wave of U.K. drill, a scene that has been on the rise since the 2010s. It's also a region with one of the highest rates of violent crime in the city. Cee's raps have a calm and collected cool about them, but underneath, you get the sense there's a more deeply rooted feeling. Since dropping *23,* he's gone on to release the mega-viral hit "Doja," capitalizing on the hook-driven machinations of TikTok's For You page. The song got so popular, with its infectious hook, that eventually Doja Cat herself caught wind, popping up in Central Cee's comment sections joking about a reference to her on the track.

That's not the only high-profile connection the now-25-year-old MC has garnered recently. After linking up with fellow U.K. rap heavyweight Dave for the joint EP *Split Decision,* featuring the crossover hit single "Sprinter," Central Cee connected with noted U.K.-rap fan Drake for a universally acclaimed On the Radar Freestyle. It was his first stop on the road to eventually becoming a household name in the States. It doesn't hurt that his On the Radar appearance with Drizzy found both rappers firmly in their comfort zones, delivering some of the best verses in the segment's storied history. Cench, as Central Cee is colloquially known, did more than just keep his own alongside a veteran; the freestyle could easily make for a hit single on a project from either rapper. It's been a long time coming, but rappers from across the pond are finally becoming a major part of the hip-hop tapestry, and Central Cee is sure to go down as one of the most essential crossovers. "The music is just how I feel. It's just like a page in my diary," he told *Rolling Stone* last year. **J.I.**

CENTRAL CEE PHOTOGRAPH BY GRIFFIN LOTZ

LATTO PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC HART JR.

LATTO

IN 2020, WHEN LATTO titled her debut album — and herself — *Queen of Da Souf,* it seemed more like a hopeful manifesto than a reality. She was 21, had been grinding since she was a 16-year-old contestant on a rap show helmed by Jermaine Dupri, and had barely cracked the Hot 100. And yet, Latto has rapidly made good on that title in the three years since, becoming a rising superstar thanks to a combination of diligence, development, and strategy. "A lot of people just do this for a check: Make a catchy song, and go viral," she told *Rolling Stone* as her breakthrough single, "Big Energy," climbed up the charts last year. "But I was at the end of the real cypher come-up, the groundwork, passing-out-CDs thing."

Even now, as a budding titan, that selling-CDs-out-the-trunk fervor persists in her. It's what makes her sophomore record, last year's *777,* feel so urgent. (It was the first album she put out as "Latto," having originally gone by "Miss Mulatto" as a kid, then simply "Mulatto," aiming to flip the script on the identity struggles that she faced growing up with a white mother and Black father south of Atlanta.) Everything she's put out since has been even better. You can hear how much sharper her already-potent raps are from single to single, album to album, feature to feature, holding her own beside Cardi B, Trina, Gucci Mane, Mariah Carey, Lil Baby, and Megan Thee Stallion. She's carved out a home for herself on the charts ("Seven," her hit with Jungkook of BTS, went to Number One this summer), charged up Coachella, scored major-brand deals, and has been nominated for the Best New Artist Grammy. The rap game is certainly starting to look like her kingdom. **M.C.**

MAVI

MAVI PONDERS the permutations of existence like a great philosopher — except Aristotle probably didn't have the same knack for melodizing his observations. The Charlotte, North Carolina-raised Mavi pursued both a rap career and a neuroscience degree at Howard University before releasing his brilliant breakout, *Let the Sun Talk,* in 2019. On last year's *Laughing so Hard, it Hurts,* he combed through the grief that engulfed him over the pandemic. "I lost some fear along the way of what it would mean for me to say truly how I feel," he told *Rolling Stone* last year. The world's better for his courage. **A.G.**

NONAME

HIP-HOP IS at its core protest music, born from the experiences of Black folks on the margins. While the genre's become a cultural and commercial juggernaut, artists like Chicago-raised Noname maintain an ethos that's adversarial to assimilation. Her catalog is a testament to rap as a tool for revolution, full of big ideas delivered in an elegantly elastic flow. And she matches her ethos with action. "I don't do brand deals, I don't take advances," she told RS in 2021. "I don't like doing things I know are going to build on my celebrity because that's not ethical when I'm trying to be anti-capitalist." **J.I.**

THIS SPREAD, FROM TOP: JEFF HAHNE/GETTY IMAGES; TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: EDWIG HENSON; MICHAEL AGHARESE; RUEGUH.

Ice Spice

WE LIVE IN an increasingly ephemeral world, where it's easy to chalk up viral success to the fleeting nature of social media feeds. And yet, Ice Spice endures. A year after her viral hit "Munch" took over the globe, the Bronx native has managed to keep the world's attention. Her debut EP, *Like...?*, offered a framework for a different kind of rap star, one steeped in the snippet-driven ecosystem most young people engage with online, while retaining the bravado and wit that built New York rap heavyweights like Cam'Ron. Taylor Swift was smart enough to connect with the 23-year-old for a remix of "Karma," and Ice Spice counts Drake as a mentor. Maybe that's why Ice Spice, despite having released only a handful of songs, is such a force in the rap world. Beyond making bops, she's articulating a relationship to fame and social media that is decidedly Gen Z. It's OK if you don't get it, but don't expect her to be going away anytime soon. **J.I.**

BLAQBONEZ

BLAQBONEZ has been declaring himself the "best rapper in Africa" for nearly as long as he's been rapping publicly. The 27-year-old Nigerian got his start as a teen battle rapper in his native country and went on to release his debut in 2021, *Sex Over Love*, one of the best albums of that year *anywhere*. We're not weighing in on that Best Rapper in Africa title, but Blaqbonez's willingness to declare it, his unflinching drive to live up to it, and the skill of his execution — be it in the blazing in booth or cracking jokes on social media — is why we're not mad at it. **M.C.**

LUCKI

Chicago rapper Lucki built a steady fan base over the course of a decade, all while avoiding the telltale pitfalls of young artists in the internet era. His searing vulnerability — letting his tangled emotional interior unfurl over moody trap beats — has made him one of rap's foremost storytellers. He counts Drake, Future, and Playboi Carti as supporters, which is all you really need to know about his depth and range. Lucki's 2023 release, *Flawless Like Me*, is a vibrant distillation of his best talents and proof that the 27-year-old MC is only just getting started. **J.I.**

SAUCY SANTANA

HIP-HOP HAS been notoriously heteronormative for decades. As its patriarchal walls crumble a little, Saucy Santana has burst through them with killer attitude, snarky wit, and an insatiable appetite for a good time.

"I see a lot of records that are blowing up now aren't very calculated," he said at a recent Spotify event in his new home of Atlanta. "It's not like 'We have to reach this algorithm.' I see a lot of fun, free music is happening right now, and that's what I've always been doing." His uninhibited personality pops off his tracks, making them go viral, like 2020's "Material Girl" and "Walk." As a gay rapper, he follows in the footsteps of all kinds of hip-hop changemakers, from Big Freedia to his close friends Yung Miami and JT of City Girls, to assert his talent, fashion sense, femininity, and his right to express all three without remorse. "I wanna have my feet in every genre," Santana told *Rolling Stone*. "Two years from now it's giving the face of fashion, it's giving the face of makeup, it's giving Grammys, it's giving movies ... the shit that I can do in two more years, I can't even imagine," Santana says. **M.C.**

TISAKOREAN

TISAKOREAN STARTED out as a dancer and a DJ, and says he only started making music because he wanted a soundtrack to match his style. His brand of rap, not unlike Lil B or ILoveMakonnen, can best be described as silly, which is the attitude he'd like to engender in his fans. On TikTok, Tisa's dance videos rack up millions of views, thanks to the ways they remind you of how fun hip-hop can be. In 2021, he told *Rolling Stone* about his fondest musical memory, a collapse of generation and genre courtesy of Pharrell Williams and Jay-Z: "When I seen the 'Frontin'' video, I didn't know about Prince, honestly," Tisa explains of the Williams and N.E.R.D. hit. "So when I seen that 'Frontin'' video, I didn't know that song was made *for* Prince." The rap game will always need its lighthearted, playful spirit, and TisaKorean is a perfect example of an artist who taps into that sensibility naturally. **J.I.**

454

THE RAPPER 454 offsets his spaced-out production, replete with shimmering synths and rowdy breakbeats, with a flow that's full of real emotion. His debut, *4 Real,* arrived in March 2021 as a fully realized vision of an artist with a clear point of view. On the standout track "Andretti," he's effortlessly clever, delivering thoughtful bars with philosophical detachment: "Polo from the old age, feds know that it's no case/ We sped like road rage, new puffer for cold days," he raps. Born Willie Wilson in a suburb of Orlando, 454 has garnered a robust fan base, at one point earning a spot on Frank Ocean's Blonded Radio. Earlier this year, he collaborated with in-demand New York producer Evilgiane for *Fast 5,* a stripped-down and emotive take on the textured sounds that have made him one of this generation's brightest stars. **J.I.**

MIKE

RECENTLY, AT a packed show in Brooklyn's Herbert Von King Park, MIKE, 24, hosted his third-annual Young World Festival, a celebration of the borough's vibrant underground rap movement. The rapper and producer is based out of Brooklyn and has been sharing music on Bandcamp since 2015. He's toured with acts like Freddie Gibbs and Earl Sweatshirt. MIKE's serene raps feel like a live broadcast from his spirit, and he's bubbling into the mainstream with a rising generation of young fans. As a producer, he wrangles samples and textures from disparate corners of music and sensation. On his latest album, *Beware of the Monkey,* he balances emotional resonance with calm, soulful production. MIKE has a penchant for emotive, sparse storytelling. "I always thought about artists who have the ability to create their own world and build that from scratch or from nothing," he told *Rolling Stone* on the eve of last year's Young World Festival. "When I think about basically all the artists that are on the bill, it's people that have created those types of worlds with music and shit, at least to me." MIKE's innate sense of intimacy with his fan base is part of an increasingly potent form of audience building among the current generation of rappers, eschewing the trappings of hyper exposure to creating something closer to community on the ground. Beyond being one of his generation's most exciting voices, MIKE is laying the foundation for the future. **J.I.**

Lil Yachty

IT'S EASY TO imagine a middle-aged Lil Yachty accepting some kind of lifetime achievement award in the not-so-distant future. The Atlanta-born MC entered the rap game at the ripe age of 18, introducing the then-ascendant genre of "mumble rap" to the mainstream. It didn't come without its fair share of detractors, but over the course of the past decade, Yachty has proven more steadfast in his creative vision than most, releasing an album of psychedelic rock as a follow-up to a formidable mixtape honoring the talents of Detroit's vibrant rap scene.

More than just a diligent MC focused on getting better, Yachty is one of hip-hop's foremost nurturers of talent, known to create opportunities for up-and-comers just getting their start. In many ways, Yachty represents the collaborative spirit of hip-hop in the internet age: endlessly curious and open to trying new things. His efforts haven't always been understood. His announcement that he was more than just a rapper ahead of his recent album *Let's Start Here* was met with criticism from some who saw it as turning his back on the genre. But that couldn't be further from the truth.

"I'm not speaking on all SoundCloud rappers. I'm speaking on me. This is for me, because everybody don't have that work ethic," he told *Rolling Stone* earlier this year. "Everyone ain't going to put the hours in to understand a new genre and how to execute something the right way." **J.I.**

Baby Tate

BABY TATE'S BREAKTHROUGH single "I Am" gave rise to the pandemic's most viral affirmation. TikToks and Instagram videos featuring the song's opening credo — "I am healthy, I am wealthy, I am rich, I am that bitch" — inundated feeds as global lockdowns inspired everything but positivity. Selfie camera meditations to the track started jumping the world over. Back then, she still went by Yung Baby Tate, a moniker she's since shortened, perhaps inadvertently signaling her music's maturity over the years. She told *Rolling Stone* in 2021 that for her forthcoming projects she was planning on "going way more into an R&B space, which I've been kind of hinting at for a long time. You know, I'm not just a rapper. I'm an artist."

Since then, she's had breakout success with her Warner debut, *Mani/Pedi,* from last year, a rousing statement from an artist entering her element. Born Tate Sequoya Farris in Georgia, Baby Tate was raised by a single mother who was also a musician, and you can hear both her fierce sense of independence and reverence for women in the rap community in her music. **J.I.**

THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES; LAUREN DAVIS; GUNNER STAHL; JOSH BRASTED/FILMMAGIC; NUVANY DAVID; CAMERON MOORE

THE HIDDEN TRACKS OF DR. LUKE

For a decade, superproducer Dr. Luke lived under the cloud of a rape accusation from Kesha — and harsh words from some of pop's biggest names. So how did he end up back on top of the charts?

BY BRIAN HIATT

ILLUSTRATION BY NATE SWEITZER

IN JULY 2014, the songwriter, producer, and mogul Lukasz Gottwald, a.k.a. Dr. Luke, paced the halls of one of his favorite workplaces, Conway Studios in Hollywood, and mused about thriving under pressure. The way he saw it, he faced more of it as a behind-the-scenes hitmaker than artists do. "I always hear artists talk about that," Gottwald said, in a previously unpublished segment of a ROLLING STONE interview, at a moment when the 10-year hot streak that began for him with Kelly Clarkson's "Since U Been Gone" was about to come to a cataclysmic end. "But as a producer-songwriter, you have to do it all of the time. Every day, it's like, 'OK, you had a hit. How do you beat that one?' There's that overwhelming feeling: fear of failure and doom. And that's natural. That's part of the creative process."

Gottwald's creative talent and ruthless perseverance have rarely been under dispute, though the same couldn't be said for his character. Within months of that interview, he became one of the most reviled figures in the music industry, thanks to a mud-splattering legal battle with his former protégée Kesha. In a suit filed in October 2014, she alleged he gave her a pill and then raped her on a drunken night in 2005 – and also triggered a life-threatening eating disorder by criticizing her weight. Kesha's lawsuits stalled out by 2018 after a series of unfavorable rulings, none of which reached a factual conclusion about the rape allegation. But Gottwald pursued a defamation countersuit, alleging she invented the accusation to get out of her contracts with him. (The case expanded to a separate count, ultimately upheld by a judge, that Kesha defamed Gottwald in a text to Lady Gaga that falsely claimed he raped Katy Perry.) In late June of this year, with a trial looming, Dr. Luke and Kesha settled his defamation case.

In the joint social media statement for the settlement, Kesha wrote: "Only God knows what happened that night. As I always said, I cannot recount everything that happened." Gottwald's attorney, Christine Lepera, told reporters the statement "clears Luke's name" of the rape allegation. Kesha's quote ran next to one from Gottwald: "I am absolutely certain that nothing happened. I never drugged or assaulted her and would never do that to anyone." The settlement was likely triggered by a ruling that Gottwald is a public figure, which would have made a court victory more difficult for him. But the wording of it all, obviously the product of extensive negotiations, was clearly "slanted" in Gottwald's favor, as attorney Susan Crumiller, who wasn't involved in the case, put it.

Long before that apparent final victory for Gottwald, in an industry with short memories and an unending appetite for hit songs, he'd already made it back to the center of pop music – and his renewed success arrived despite a series of reputational bruises that went beyond the rape accusation. The allegations of fixating on Kesha's weight have never gone away (though he's denied it), along with accusations of controlling behavior toward artists, and the overarching sense, as one successful songwriter puts it, that Gottwald was "a fucking dick to everybody." But even so, "he continues to just win," says an executive who works with producers and songwriters. (Like the other sources interviewed in this story, he asked for anonymity because of Gottwald's power and influence.) "It's unbelievable."

LAST YEAR ALONE, Gottwald had a Number One smash as one of the writer-producers on Nicki Minaj's "Super Freaky Girl" and a Number Three hit with Latto's "Big Energy," along with continued streams and airplay for multiple collaborations with Doja Cat. Those songs, among other successes, were enough to win him ASCAP's Pop Music Songwriter of the Year award in May. Unlike, say, the Grammys, the prize wasn't a subjective decision. It simply meant he'd garnered more streams and airplay than any other songwriter that year.

Senior writer BRIAN HIATT *interviewed Greta Gerwig for the July–August issue.*

In late June, Dr. Luke and Kesha settled his defamation case, releasing joint social media statements.

"I think he probably feels somewhat invincible," says one songwriter. "Clearly, he took a gigantic reputation hit through all this. But I think he still feels like, 'Well, I still make the music industry go through me.'"

Gottwald's return to the top seemed particularly unlikely in 2016, when outrage over Kesha's allegations hit its peak. The public perception at the time was that her contracts with him would block her from releasing music, and her alleged experience became a symbol of every creepily exploitative Svengali-protégée relationship. Fans held organized protests outside of courtrooms and signed petitions; Adele gave Kesha a shout-out from the stage of the BRIT Awards; Lady Gaga, Fiona Apple, and Jack Antonoff expressed support online; Taylor Swift gave Kesha $250,000 to cover financial needs. It was the era of #freekesha.

"Regardless of whether or not Dr. Luke did that," Pink told *The New York Times* in 2017, referring to the rape allegation, "this is his karma, and he earned it because he's not a good person." Kelly Clarkson was a particularly vocal supporter, testifying in a 2017 deposition in Kesha's case that she found Gottwald to be "dismissive and belittling." "I don't know anyone who likes him," she said, adding that an employee of her former record company, RCA, told her "almost every female at our label doesn't like working with him." The next year, Clarkson told the ROLLING STONE *Music Now* podcast that she found herself "totally bawling on the phone with my manager" at the prospect of working with Gottwald for a second time, in 2009. (Clarkson's reps had no further comment.)

In the face of that level of opprobrium, for four years – 2015 to 2018 – Gottwald's songwriting and production career seemed to fade. In 2013 alone, before the lawsuit, Gottwald worked with Britney Spears, his longtime collaborator Katy Perry, Shakira, Nicki Minaj, and Maroon 5, among others. In the years that followed, A-list women were mostly absent from his résumé, save for stray tracks with Jennifer Lopez, Fergie, and Minaj. (Lopez apparently didn't know Gottwald was involved when she recorded her track, and it appears that Fergie worked with him before the lawsuit.) Gottwald co-produced Perry hits from "Teenage Dream" to "I Kissed a Girl," but his credits were absent from her post-2013 albums. (A rep for Perry did not respond to a request for comment.)

Pink and Clarkson were not alone in their feelings about him. "Do I believe that people wanted to see him lose?" says the successful songwriter. "Yeah." (A representative for Dr. Luke did not respond to multiple requests for comment. A representative for Doja Cat also did not respond to a request for comment.)

The lawsuit forced Gottwald into the shadows, in contrast to what had been an unusual level of visibility for a writer-producer – he had even come close to becoming a judge on *Amer-*

MARIO ANZUONI/REUTERS/REDUX

ican Idol. Even in retreat, however, the powerful business apparatus he built at his peak kept humming. His publishing company, Prescription Songs, continued to sign songwriters of various stripes: the melody writers known as topliners, producers, beatmakers, artists, "vibe people." He also had a Sony-distributed record label, Kemosabe, and Gottwald never stopped his own production work, even as he experimented with abandoning his Dr. Luke moniker for aliases like Tyson Trax and Made in China.

Prescription only grew larger during the Kesha-Gottwald battles, becoming one of the industry's most successful pop factories: It ranked seventh on *Billboard*'s 2022 Year End Hot 100 Publishing Corporations list. Among the songs credited to its signees are hits for Dua Lipa, Lizzo, the Weeknd, Selena Gomez, Iggy Azalea, Troye Sivan, and dozens of others. In modern pop songwriting, any given song might be worked on by multiple songwriters and producers who are unlikely to have ever been in a room together – and any number of them might be signed to Prescription Songs. "You can't set foot in a session here without working with someone who is signed to Prescription," one L.A.-based songwriter says. "It's everywhere." That approach was at least partly pioneered by Gottwald, as a songwriter who used to work for him points out: It's a business model based on "building teams of producers and songwriters, like forming Voltron," he says. "It's creativity through a brutally commercial lens."

In private, Gottwald apparently projected nonchalance in the face of his challenges. He "comes across very confident," says one songwriter. "His aura is very, like, not worried, unconcerned with that sort of thing. He's fucking lawyered up. I think he probably feels somewhat invincible. Clearly, he took a gigantic reputation hit through all this. But I think he still feels like, 'Well, I still make the music industry go through me.' "

Gottwald's swagger is only reinforced by his wealth. As early as 2011, he said he was set for life financially – in the first decade of his career, he earned $77.8 million in royalties as a producer-songwriter, according to his lawyers. In 2015, he bought a luxury compound in Hawaii where he hosts artists and writers. In 2018, he sold a bottled-water company he co-founded, called CORE Nutrition, to Keurig Dr Pepper for $525 million. "He probably feels like, 'I still have my compound in Hawaii. I still fly private,' " one songwriter says.

WITH GOTTWALD'S REPUTATION seemingly keeping established female stars away from him, he simply doubled down on working with new ones. Prescription and Kemosabe, and the scouts at each, were powerful tools to funnel new talent his way. "I think the nature of being a writer-producer," says the executive who works with songwriters and producers, "is it's such an inside job that I think you can kind of sneak your way back into the ballpark."

In his semi-exile years, Gottwald also began to refocus on hip-hop and R&B, where he seemed to face less scrutiny, the executive suggests. "Hip-hop was kind of a safe space for him," the exec says, adding that short memories for even recent history among some Gen Z artists helped. In 2020, Saweetie released "Tap In," a Too Short-sampling song that was solely produced by Gottwald. It went to Number 20 on the pop charts, and Saweetie later claimed she had no idea who Dr. Luke was when they worked together. "I'm so green," Saweetie told Vulture. "Maybe that's a double-edged sword because I'm coming into the studio and I'm not knowing who these people are. I was able to learn about all of his achievements, and all of the allegations as well, after a couple of sessions."

The same year, the posthumous Juice WRLD single "Wishing Well" hit Number Five – it was also a Dr. Luke co-production, from an artist who could no longer be questioned about the collaboration. "That's what makes him so prolific in this industry," says one writer-producer who's worked with Gottwald on some songs over the past decade. "He always figures out how to stay ahead of the curve." ("Whatever you do, you can't do that again," Gottwald told ROLLING STONE, in an unpublished segment of a 2011 interview. "You can't do the same trick again, so it forces you to change.")

From top: Doja Cat, Kim Petras, and Saweetie have all worked with Dr. Luke in recent years — though Doja Cat has said she won't work with him again, and Saweetie said she didn't know about the allegations.

Being a hitmaker for hire was never enough for Gottwald. He wanted control. He had been deeply involved in the early success of Katy Perry, but his first real attempt at single-handedly creating a superstar was Kesha, followed by his discovery of the then-14-year-old Becky G, who had a slow climb to stardom – she didn't get to release an album until seven years of singles during her time under Gottwald's tutelage. "It is sort of a known thing that he takes ownership of his artists," says one singer-songwriter.

In 2012, Gottwald told ROLLING STONE how deeply attached he felt to Kesha's then-upcoming *Warrior*, which he was producing. "I feel in some ways it falls on me as much as it falls on Kesha," he said, in a previously unpublished interview segment. "I feel as attached to the project. And I don't want to let her down, and I don't want to let myself down, either." In June of that year, according to court filings, Gottwald saw Kesha eating "turkey and Diet Coke" when she was supposed to be on a juice fast. He started "a discussion," he wrote in an email, "about how she can be more disciplined in a diet." Kesha left in tears, and when her manager complained, Gottwald shot back, "We all get concerned when she is breaking her diet plan. We have seen it happen multiple times. It is also double-concerning when the A-list songwriters and producers are reluctant to give Kesha their songs because of her weight." Gottwald's lawyer suggested his emails were taken out of context and reflected on Kesha's "own concerns about her weight."

Kesha developed an eating disorder that she has said almost killed her, and ended up in rehab in 2014. "I really just thought I wasn't supposed to eat food," she revealed to ROLLING STONE in a 2017 cover story. "And then, if I ever did, I felt very ashamed, and I would make myself throw up because I'd think, 'Oh, my God, I can't believe I actually did that horrible thing. I'm so ashamed of myself because I don't deserve to eat food.' "

Becky G (born Rebbecca Gomez) filed a less-publicized lawsuit against Gottwald's water brand CORE, in 2018, contending that Gottwald pushed her to constantly promote the brand, and that she was used more as "a walking, talking, singing billboard" than as an artist. "Luke made it clear both directly and implicitly that Ms. Gomez's ability to have a music career would be tied to her continuing involvement in promoting CORE," the complaint said. CORE Nutrition denied all of the allegations, and Gomez dropped the suit in 2019. (A rep for Becky G had no comment.)

"He's amazing at artist discovery and development and surrounding himself with really, really talented writers and producers," says the successful songwriter, "but he plays mental games with them, even the men. Producers or writers signed to him over the years, I would hear from all of them, how he would play favorites and make the other ones feel jealous. They all want Daddy Luke's attention.... I've worked with everybody in his camp, who have all experienced him, at one point or another, making them feel small [with] verbal and mental torture. I witnessed a songwriter asking Luke for something and shaking while he was asking him. He's a fucking genius. But he's also a master manipulator, and awful to the people who work with him."

In an unpublished segment of Gottwald's very first print interview, with ROLLING STONE in 2011, he painted himself as a caring mentor. "I feel like I teach them a lot," he said. "But I think what's amazing, the thing that I didn't plan on when I started doing it, the thing I didn't realize is how gratifying it would be to be able to help people and sincerely make a difference in their lives. The other thing is how much that you actually learn from other people, too. And so I think that will allow me to go a little longer."

GOTTWALD GREW UP in Manhattan as a musical prodigy, an indifferent student, and a teenage drug dealer. "I've gotten into fucked-up situations," he said of his teen years, in a mostly unpublished interview segment from 2011. "I had a good business going on, you know? I was 15 years old, I was walking around with like $15,000 cash in my pocket. And stupid, jumping the turnstile in the subway station with like a few pounds of weed in my backpack and all that money. When you're that age you're just not wise. You think you're invincible.... I was moving a good 25 pounds of weed a week."

His guitar teacher persuaded him to stop dealing and get serious about music, but it was actually his own weed dealer who led him to [*Cont. on 77*]

FROM TOP: TAYLOR HILL/FILMMAGIC; KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES; AMY SUSSMAN/GETTY IMAGES

The Lost Children of Football

They gave up the game after high school, but the damage seemingly was already done. Now, their families grieve and want answers

BY ALEX MORRIS

Illustration by Karolis Strautniekas

Since DuQuan Myers died

six years ago, he's come back in ways that are mysterious and magical and hard to explain. It started the day of his funeral, when the doves that were released over his coffin refused to fly home, perching instead in the oak tree just above his grave as if witnessing a visitation. Then there was that drive to El Paso, Texas, when – not once but twice – the windshield wipers started swiping just as the satellite radio cut out midsong, switching to the tune Myers' sister Natasha had been listening to at the exact moment when her mom called with the news that her brother was gone. There was the way Myers' nephew – the one who was just a baby when Myers died – would sometimes point into an empty corner of a room and say "uncle." There were the Pokémon cards that Myers had loved as a child but hadn't played with in years turning up one by one in unexpected and impossible places, like the middle of a clean kitchen floor. There were the nights when Myers' mother, Letitia Wilbourn, would feel him, actually feel him, resting his head upon her shoulder, even though no one was there. But, of course, that's not right. There was someone there. He was there. She knew it. Such is the logic of grief.

Tragedy rips the grieving out of the storyline of their own life, denies them any sense of what the past meant or the future will hold. Wilbourn remembers few details from her son's funeral, but she does remember the doves. "That lady said, 'These birds have never done this. Never,' " she tells me, sitting on a small sofa in the darkened living room of her modest house in the suburbs of Fort Worth, surrounded by pictures and mementos from her son's short life: an infant footprint from the hospital where he was born, a class project he wrote about wanting to own a whale, a photo of him posing in his Little League uniform with a shy smile. "The lady was like, 'Was he a very gentle spirit?' "

DuQuan Myers *was* a gentle spirit. His family called him the "animal whisperer," the kid who loved to roam the farmland that still abutted their Echo Heights neighborhood and who would bring home all kinds of creatures he'd "rescued" – dogs, cats, turtles, frogs, lizards, toads, even once a snake that Wilbourn found, to her horror, in a candy jar. When his three older sisters squabbled, Myers was the one who always could diffuse the situation, the baby brother whose humor and charisma and cheerfulness were impossible to resist. It fit no known narrative that Myers would hurt any living thing, himself included. And yet on the evening of Feb. 17, 2017, Wilbourn had been driving home from her job as a cop for the Tarrant County Sheriff's Office when she received a phone call. On the other end, she could hear the keening sobs of the young woman Myers had dated off and on for years. "She said, 'Quan's dead,' " Wilbourn explains. "I was like, 'What?' She said, 'DuQuan's dead.' " Home alone in his apartment near Texas State, 26 years old and only months away from getting a degree in criminal justice, Myers had shot himself in the head.

Without thinking, wild with grief, Wilbourn turned her car toward San Marcos and drove 77 miles in 30 blind minutes before a friend called and persuaded her to pull over and turn around. Myers was gone. There was nothing to be done that night, which Wilbourn spent at home, alone, her phone switched off so nothing could puncture the cocoon of mourning and confusion. She'd spoken to Myers earlier that day, just before he'd begun his shift at FedEx. He'd seemed fine, his normal self. But had she missed something? She knew he had a gun, but he lived in Texas; everyone has one. She'd only discussed suicide with him once before, back when Chris Benoit, a wrestler Myers admired, hanged himself. Myers had said, "Oh, I'd never commit suicide. I love me way too much for that." Then he'd grinned at her with that way he had. "Look at how pretty I am." Now, her beautiful boy was gone.

In the car the next day, on the way to San Marcos to begin the procedural processes of death – closing up Myers' apartment, identifying his body, speaking to investigators who had no doubt that the gunshot wound was self-inflicted – Wilbourn was on a call with the medical examiner when, out of nowhere, she heard herself asking if they could save Myers' brain, if they could have it studied. "I just knew that the suicide didn't make sense, because he wasn't suicidal," she says, her voice measured, her Texas accent melodic. "I was just praying for answers, and when the phone rang, that's what came out. I wasn't thinking that anything was wrong with his brain or anything like that, I just knew something wasn't right. It's just the mother's instinct."

There was also, perhaps, a subconscious concern. Myers had played football for seven years, from sixth grade through his senior year of high school. In the time since he'd stopped playing, Wilbourn had learned about chronic traumatic encephalopathy – the degenerative brain disease that had plagued NFL greats like Mike Webster, Andre Waters, and Dave Duerson (who shot himself in the heart specifically so that his brain would be intact when studied). Like many people, she'd been alarmed by the reports of these famously tough athletes whose very toughness had been their undoing. Then again, she didn't actually think Myers fit the CTE profile: He had not played football past high school; he'd never had a concussion that she knew of; he was nothing like Aaron Hernandez or Junior Seau, men who'd grown angry and addled and violent before dying angry and addled and violent deaths. So it was a surprise, she says, when "the first thing out of my mouth was 'Can we donate his brain to Boston University?' " She looks down at the photos surrounding her. "I think that was just a God thing."

IT HAS BEEN almost two decades since Pittsburgh Steelers Hall of Famer Mike Webster become the first NFL player to be diagnosed with CTE, after a heart attack at age 50 put an end to misery so intense that Webster – by then sleeping in his car because he couldn't remember where he lived – would shoot himself with a taser gun until he mercifully blacked out. Even then, CTE wasn't exactly a new discovery: A medical report from 1928 described boxers with "punch-drunk syndrome," later classified as dementia pugilistica. The first known use of the term "chronic traumatic encephalopathy" occurred in a neurology paper written in 1949. But Webster's 2005 diagnosis was a watershed moment, implicating the most popular sport in America, one grafted into the guts and glory of the American psyche – and one that millions of American kids were suiting up to play every season. So documentaries were made. Brain banks were established. Funding flowed. And as more and more brains of dead athletes were submitted for study, it became clear that, while CTE was a progressive disease, it was not the sole province of aging NFL players. It could show up in the brains of people in their teens and twenties, people who'd never played past the age of 18.

Even in CTE's earliest stages – and for reasons scientists are still exploring – its effects could be grave. "We're north of 1,300 brains, and while the overwhelming majority are from people who are older, we certainly have hundreds of brains of people in that younger age group," says Dr. Robert Cantu, co-director of the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy, chair of neurosurgery at Emerson Hospital, and the nation's lead-

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If you or someone you know is considering suicide, please call or text 988 to reach the SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE. *You can also reach out to the* CRISIS TEXT LINE, *a free, 24/7 confidential text-messaging service that provides support to people in crisis when they text 741741.*

Bartlett (right and below) felt his brain had somehow turned on him, and he grew moody. "He knew there was something wrong," his mom says.

After high school, Callaghan (right and below) lived in a daze. His parents later learned he had stage 1 CTE.

Myers (below and bottom left) had not shown many symptoms but was diagnosed with stage 1 CTE.

PHOTOGRAPHS ARE COURTESY OF THE FAMILIES

ing authority on concussions. "CTE hasn't directly killed anybody in their teens, twenties, thirties, forties, but we have a lot of people with CTE that have died at those ages. Almost all of them have died by suicide."

It is well-established that suffering even just one concussion is a risk factor for developing mental-health issues. The year after Myers' death, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a study that found that a person's risk of dying by suicide doubled after being diagnosed with a concussion. A 2021 study in the *Journal of Neurotrauma* followed patients for 180 days and found "significantly increased rates of depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideation following concussion" in those under 26 years of age. Another study, from 2022 and published in *American Journal of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation,* found that 48 percent of all concussion patients were later diagnosed with depression, anxiety, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia in the three years that they were tracked, and that "all of the mental illnesses this study chose to evaluate were present in a higher proportion of patients after a concussion than the general population."

But CTE isn't just about diagnosed concussions, most of which go on to heal with no obvious, lasting effects. It's about repeated, seemingly benign assaults to brain tissue, little "dings" that could occur dozens of times in a single game and that a player may not even clock but that nonetheless cause damage at the cellular level – microscopically torn blood vessels, disconnected neurons, jumbled tau proteins (the building blocks of the fibers that carry nutrients and messages from cell to cell). Given time, the brain can usually repair this damage – except when players don't even know there's been damage, and so don't grant themselves time to recover. In that case, injuries can compound until the brain is overwhelmed, until – unable to reconfigure themselves – the tau proteins essentially rot, creating toxic lesions that spread deeper into the brain and even sometimes into the brain stem. This past June, the largest CTE study to date confirmed that the best predictor of future brain disease was not the number of diagnosed concussions a player had sustained but rather the cumulative force of all hits to the head throughout their career. In other words, a lot of little impacts could be as damaging as a smattering of major ones.

This means that when kids across America suit up this fall to square off on the gridiron, every hit will matter, every "ding" and every bell rung will count toward an unspecified number past which the brain might be permanently impaired. It means that no amount of concussion protocols can definitively stave off disaster, that some level of danger is lurking in every play. It means that America's greatest game is hurting our children in insidious and incalculable ways, and that address-

ing the issue might mean fundamentally changing the way we teach a game that has become fundamental to America's sense of self.

"It's a really profound problem to confront, especially for a sport that's been at the center of so much of our community and cultural life, as youth football is and has been," says Kathleen Bachynski, a professor of public health at Muhlenberg College and author of *No Game for Boys to Play: The History of Youth Football and the Origins of a Public Health Crisis*. Bachynski's research details a long history of medical objections that have done little to intercept the sport's cultural dominance. In the 1890s, *The Chicago Tribune* announced that football would "physically ruin thousands of young men." In the early 1900s, the brutality of Ivy League games led them to be described as "boy-killing, education-prostituting, gladiatorial sport" (even Teddy Roosevelt intervened, leading to the limitation of certain plays). And throughout the 20th century, doctors continued to sound the alarm in publications like the *Journal of the American Medical Association* ("Football is no game for boys to play"), the *Journal of School Health* ("More concussions occur in football than is generally realized"), and the *American Journal of Public Health* ("[Children are] encouraged to addle their own brains with repeated concussions in such sports as football and boxing"). Meanwhile, as boxing declined in popularity, football's reach only grew. Youth leagues began mushrooming in the Sixties. Kids as young as five suited up. "It's really hard for us, societally, to confront something that we thought was great might not have been so great," says Bachynski of this cultural expansion. "But there are some health risks that we have decided even a fully-informed parent can't allow their kid to [take]. If you understand all the risks and harms of cigarettes, you cannot let your 12-year-old smoke a cigarette – that's not something you can choose as a parent. And we have to decide: 'Do repeated head impacts fall in that category?' "

For football's defenders, the answer is no. "I love this sport. I think it's America's greatest sport," says Dr. Julian Bailes, a former team physician for the Pittsburgh Steelers, a neurological consultant to the NFL Players Association, and the head of the medical advisory committee for Pop Warner, the country's largest youth-football league. Bailes knew Mike Webster personally and, having helped identify the clinical evidence of Webster's CTE (he's played by Alec Baldwin in the movie *Concussion*), is considered to be a pioneer in the field. He certainly acknowledges the cumulative nature of the risk when it comes to head impacts and CTE, but argues that the threshold for developing the disease would be unlikely to be met just by playing a few years of youth football. "I'm not pro-head injury or pro-concussion, but there's no conclusive evidence that if you play youth football it's going to lead to long-term brain damage," he tells me. "The risk occurs as [players] get into high school and college, and they are big and strong and fast and have 600 to a thousand hits a season. So in my opinion, it's a misdirected argument. There's probably 100 kids who get killed on bicycles every year. There's no kids dying playing Pop Warner football."

But science continues to raise red flags about the sport. A 2016 study published in *Radiology* found that playing just one season of youth football caused measurable changes in the white matter of children's brains as well as diminished brain function, even in players who had not displayed signs of having a concussion. Another, from 2018, showed that both years of football play and the age at which an athlete started affected the volume of the thalamus, the egg-shaped structure in the center of the brain that relays information from the body and has been associated with cognition and mood. "Tau is the sexy thing to talk about, so that's what people talk about," says Cantu of the changes to the brain that can occur from repetitive brain injury. "They think, 'You got CTE. That's bad.' Well, you can be very bad off without CTE, just from all those hits."

According to Dr. Ann McKee, a neuropathologist and director of the CTE Center at Boston University – where she heads up the largest brain bank in the country – patients diagnosed with CTE almost always show other signs of brain damage, but those same injuries can still be present without the pathology of a progressive disease. "There are a lot of other changes that can cause very disabling symptoms, and they don't have to rise to the level of CTE," she says. "We're seeing changes in brain architecture, shrinkage of the brain, damage to brain structures, inflammation, evidence of vascular disease – meaning the tiny blood vessels of the brain are probably injured and leaky."

All of these changes have the potential to affect cognition and mental health. And even if the effect is difficult to quantify, with more than 2 million kids playing tackle football every year, certain researchers question whether it has led to an epidemic of children whose potential is diminished, whose cognition might have been a little higher, whose chances of developing depression or dying by suicide might have been a little lower if they had never played a sport in which they had repeatedly sustained injury to their brains. "The novel mental-health-disorder research is actually becoming quite strong," says Chris Nowinski, a former Harvard football player and professional wrestler who went on to co-found the Concussion Legacy Foundation and get a Ph.D. in behavioral neuroscience after a concussion he suffered in the ring in 2003 kicked off a sleep disorder, a behavior disorder, and a throbbing headache that didn't let up for years. Now considered the public face of CTE awareness – he's the guy *Newsweek* called after Hernandez died by suicide in prison, and the person families typically contact if they want to donate the brain of a loved one suspected of having CTE – Nowinski not only believes that the connection between repetitive, low-level head impacts and mental illness is strong enough that developing a mood disorder could prove to be a risk factor for developing CTE, but he also believes that the connection is strong enough to be worrisome in its own right.

A study published in the *Journal of Neurotrauma* the month before DuQuan Myers' death found that cumulative head impacts, with or without diagnosed concussions, increased the risk of depression, apathy, and behavioral dysregulation. A study published just a few months after his death found that participants with CTE showed accumulations of tau lesions specifically "in brain regions that have been associated with ... impulsivity, depressive symptoms, anxiety, and explosivity." Other studies have found football players to have higher rates of depression than the population at large. "Essentially," says Nowinski, "we're taking kids who have never had an anxiety or depression or self-harm issue, and they're getting it because of damage to their brain."

Above: The stages of CTE, from 1 to 4. The damage at stage 1 may seem minimal but can have profound effects. "People with an injured brain have a lower impulse control," says Dr. Ann McKee (left), who runs the country's largest brain bank. "They can't pull themselves back."

FROM TOP: BOSTON UNIVERSITY'S CHRONIC TRAUMATIC ENCEPHALOPATHY CENTER; SHIHO FUKADA/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

The scars on Callaghan's helmet were a source of pride — now, they're a painful reminder.

A MATTER OF hours after a bullet entered DuQuan Myers' brain, the local medical examiner in Lockhart, Texas, carefully, gingerly, removed it and submerged it in a formaldehyde solution. She then placed the container into a styrofoam box bound for Boston. Once the brain arrived at McKee's lab at the Boston University CTE Center, it was photographed and dissected. Half was snap-frozen and stored in perpetuity in a negative-80-degree freezer. The other half, the half that would be used to make the diagnosis, was put back in formaldehyde. Then the waiting game began.

Inside the skull of a living human, the brain is almost the consistency of jello, a miraculous mush of electrical charges. It took months for the formaldehyde to seep all the way in, hardening Myers' brain to a consistency that would allow it to be cut into eighth-of-an-inch slivers. Those slivers were then further dissected into hundreds of 10-micron slices, almost impossibly thin ribbons of neural matter that were stained and put into slides for McKee or one of her team to analyze under a microscope. Meanwhile, clinicians were rounding up medical records to determine Myers' medical past, his history of head impacts, and what symptoms he may have had. Both teams worked blindly: Neither would communicate about Myers' case until the clinicians had finished their research and the pathologists had made their determination.

In the spring of 2018, Letitia Wilbourn received a notification that McKee and her colleagues had come to a conclusion in her son's case. Not knowing what she expected or even what she wanted to hear, she arranged to take the call by herself, over her lunch break. "I didn't want to be home alone," she says. "I was carrying so much guilt with his suicide, thinking, 'Did I miss something? Did I do something? What caused it?' I had so much guilt."

On the call, McKee gently shared the diagnosis: Myers had had stage 1 CTE, characterized by one to three microscopic lesions. At this level, the lesions would have affected such a small percentage of Myers' brain that they may not have accounted for any changes in mood or behavior. But they would certainly have been proof of brain trauma that had been unable to fully heal. In fact, his brain also showed arteriolosclerosis (the thickening of small blood vessels), neuroinflammation, and loss of fibers in the white matter, Wilbourn was told. "Then they explained that there was nothing that I could have done to prevent what happened," she says. "They told me that there was no way for me to have known. It was an instant release. I actually had the best day I'd had since he'd died. And then came the guilt of having put him in football to begin with."

As gentle as he'd been off the field, Myers had been formidable on it, starting as both an offensive and defensive lineman despite his small size – only five feet five and 140 pounds by the end of high school. "He loved to tackle people, that's for sure," Wilbourn tells me. She thought of all those times when he had taken a brutal hit and she'd caught her breath, wondering if she should go down to the field and check on him but stopping herself with the reminder that parents weren't supposed to do that. She thought of that time he'd broken his leg during practice and been rushed to the hospital, how she'd thought that fractured fibula and tibia were the worst injuries of his life. She thought of the terrible headaches he'd have after practices, how she'd chalked them up to allergies. She remembered how in high school he'd complained about his vision and suddenly needed glasses when no one else in the family ever had. Now, on the phone with McKee, these things took on new meaning, the past reorganizing itself in her mind.

She'd been clear with the clinicians at Boston University: Myers' life was not without sadness. He and his girlfriend had recently broken up, though that wasn't unusual: They'd broken up and gotten back together more times than Wilbourn could count. His cousin had just passed away, shot by an ex in an act of passion. Like the rest of the extended family, Myers had been shocked and devastated, but seemingly not any more than anyone else. On the call with Boston University, these events were referred to as "triggers," not relevant to the official diagnosis, but certainly not irrelevant to what transpired.

"Often there's a very impulsive component to these suicides," McKee tells me when [*Cont. on 79*]

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"Life's more fun in the deep end!"

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Reviews

Music

MITSKI'S NEW AMERICAN GOTHIC

One of indie rock's most ambitious songwriters goes deeper than ever

By BRENNA EHRLICH

Mitski

The Land Is Inhospitable and So Are We

DEAD OCEANS

"I DON'T LIKE my mind/I don't like being left alone in a room," Mitski sings on her seventh album, her voice honeyed and rich despite her distress. "Please don't take ... this job from me." We could read this as your average American workaholic, consumed by the grind. But it's hard not to hear those words as autobiographical – after all, this is the same woman who decided to quit music, then came back, drawn to it like the tides to the moon. As she told ROLLING STONE in 2021: "This is who I am.... I'm going to keep getting hurt, and I'm still going to do it, because this is the only thing I can do.' "

When Mitski broke out in 2016 with her excellent ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Nicole Rifkin

MITSKI

Puberty 2, listeners latched onto her personal yet deeply relatable songwriting, her singularly emotive voice, and her music's raw intensity. Her 2018 *Be the Cowboy* was more polished, but still managed to feel like a gut punch. The synth-heavy *Laurel Hell,* her 2022 return after ostensibly quitting music, grappled with her status as indie royalty.

The Land Is Inhospitable and So Are We is another evolution: a mix of quotidian-yet-elliptical lyricism, classic country accompaniment, daring orchestral movements, and the musician's unique brand of storytelling. Mitski channels images of love, nostalgia, and the aftertaste of disappointment into a collection of impressionistic vignettes steeped in rural loneliness, like an arty singer-songwriter update of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*.

The record begins with quiet acoustic guitar on "Bug Like an Angel," in which the song's narrator eases into a whiskey haze until drinking begins to "feel like family" – the final word punctuated by a choir that sounds like a Greek chorus. "Buffalo Replaced" evokes frontiersmen shooting at animals from freight-train windows; guitars and drums churn like the wheels of a locomotive, and Mitski's voice rises like a train whistle, before ending on an image of small-town desolation. Songs like "Heaven" and "My Love Mine All Mine," are goth-country epics. "The Deal" is just as darkly transcendent, with the song's narrator imagining her soul anthropomorphized as a bird as drums roll like the beating of wings.

Mitski merges her stories with American archetypes. "When Memories Snow" recalls a showdown in a spaghetti Western, but instead of gunslingers, we have a hero battling memories that smother her like snow. "The Frost" seems to be Mitski's answer to Hank Williams' "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," while "I'm Your Man" is a murder ballad of sorts, words of devotion morphing into menace.

It isn't all hopeless. The album closes on a character who seems much like Mitski herself, alone in her room on the slinky track "I Love Me After You," which is as cool as the water she drinks in the song after brushing her hair, spritzing toner, and settling back into her skin. "Let the darkness see me," she intones. "I'm king of all the land." Despite the album's title, that land doesn't seem all that inhospitable after all.

RENEÉ RAPP BRINGS THE DRAMA

The singer's debut is an emotional roller coaster that feels like streamlined pop By MAURA JOHNSTON

Reneé Rapp
Snow Angel
INTERSCOPE

THE DEBUT full-length from the *Mean Girls* musical and *The Sex Lives of College Girls* star Reneé Rapp begins with a striking image: "Tasted the blood in my mouth," she coos at the start of its opening track, "Talk Too Much," an extreme close-up of a neurotic mind in what might be love. Spindly guitars and crisp percussion accompany Rapp's worst-case-scenario obsessions before exploding on a sugar-bomb chorus, which encapsulates early-adulthood angst while paying homage to Seventies power pop with some well-placed "*ooh-woo-ooh-woos*"; its breakdown takes the concept literally by allowing Rapp to embark on the sort of circuitous monologue that's every crushed-out person's worst nightmare.

And that's just the first song. *Snow Angel* is a collection of emotional roller coasters in miniature, with the 23-year-old Rapp's versatile voice dipping low and soaring high when the mood demands. The title track chronicles post-breakup depression with knotty metaphors and well-placed pomp-rock fireworks; its quiet-loud-quiet dynamics make it a more abstract take on the neo-power ballad, although "The Wedding Song," which marries a triumphant chorus with a bridge that hints at tumult, is a worthy entrant into that canon. "Willow," meanwhile, is a sweet, pillowy ode to a friend going through it, with Rapp shrouding her voice in velvety effects and fluid guitar solos as she tries to prevent her pal's tears – or at least take over weeping duties for a bit.

Rapp's lyrics are cutting when they need to be, too. The simmering synth-pop tune "Pretty Girls" is a standout, with sumptuous sonics and an insistent, immediately catchy chorus that sounds made for soundtracking get-ready-with-me videos, while its verses demystify the world of those rarefied beings. Across *Snow Angel,* Rapp's lyrics are endlessly quotable: "Yes, I am a feminist/But, bitch, you're making it so hard for me/To always be supporting all women," she smirks on "Poison Poison," a breezily infuriated ode to "the worst person on Earth" leavened by some well-placed "*la-la-las*." (It ends with her whisper-singing "Fuck you" in a gleeful way.)

If anything, *Snow Angel* is a sign that big-ticket pop has entered its post-*Sour* phase with gusto. (Alexander 23, who co-produced Olivia Rodrigo's "Good 4 U," produced the bulk of the album.) The emotions are big and the pyrotechnics are shrewdly deployed, and Rapp's searing soprano is up for the task of matching their intensity. It's a formula that allows Rapp to channel her larger-than-life feelings into twisty pop songs that take huge swings while being keenly aware of the person at their core.

BREAKING

Bella Dose: Your Next Favorite Girl Group

HEARTBREAK doesn't hurt as much when you're with your girls. That's exactly the sisterhood all-Latina group Bella Dose exude on their new album, *L-Pop.* Since releasing their bachata-tinged debut, *Suelta,* in 2021, Bella Dose have elevated their lyricism and expanded their sound. The girls stay true to their roots on the bachata tear-jerker "Adiós," push the needle with the EDM-dembow single "Mírame," and even go down the rock route with "Windows." Their electric chemistry is palpable throughout the LP, and it's that energy that's sure to make them the next girl group to watch. **TOMÁS MIER**

FROM TOP: KATIA TEMKIN; SHOT BY FEAR

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[*Cont. from 51*] crushes on girls, I had crushes on boys," she says. "And I didn't even really know what that meant." Her neighborhood was small and full of old ladies, as she describes it, and she'd noticed that people treated one of her neighbors, a gay man who lived in town, differently. "I started to get this inkling in my head at some point as I was approaching adolescence, like, 'Is that not allowed?' " So when she was about 11 years old, she turned to her parents with an innocent query. "I thought I was just going to be like, 'Hey … I have a question.' " This is often painted as Anhedönia's coming-out story, but the truth is, she was just a kid asking about something she didn't fully understand. "I was like, 'I think I like boys.' "

In a community obsessed with upholding puritanical ideals they believed would keep the devil at bay, all hell broke loose, she says. Families from her church would tell her mom that Anhedönia couldn't play with their kids. Her parents sent her to therapy. Her life grew even lonelier and darker, cascading into several years that she now says she hardly remembers – in between home-school lessons, she spent most of her time in bed with the curtains drawn. "Living in that environment, you just want to get out of it," she says. "I remember just kind of locking away parts of myself and thinking, 'You're going to wake up, you're going to eat, you're going to deal with whatever happens today, you're going to go to sleep, and then you're going to keep doing that until this is over.' "

At 16, she started taking classes at a community college, then went to school to become a nail technician at 18. By then, she'd flown out the door and started living on her own in Tallahassee, indulging in her new freedom. She experimented with acid, opioids, Xanax, meth once. "When you come from such an oppressive upbringing, you tend to spiral for a moment," she admits. It was right around then that the idea of Ethel Cain began blossoming in her mind.

She found other answers, too. "It wasn't until I was nearing adulthood when I discovered what being trans was, through Tumblr of all places," she recalls. "I didn't even know you could do that. I didn't know that was a thing." Up until then, her church had told her she was gay. The actual identity she came to understand for herself "wasn't even in the conversation in any way," she continues. "Wrong letter."

Anhedönia is careful when she talks about being trans, emphasizing that her gender identity is only one fact in a complex personality. "When you are trans, you are living a very specific experience that not many other people in the world have," she says. "I wanted to not be known as a trans artist, I think, not because I didn't want people to know I was trans, or because I didn't want to be proud of that fact, but…. It has shaped the way that I am in certain ways, but it's not everything."

She shared the news with her sister when she was 20, posted about it on Facebook, and simply told her mother she was starting hormone therapy. It was a more straightforward conversation than the one she'd had at age 11, and she was met with far more support. Even now, Anhedönia is cautious about revealing her past, aware that people conflate the darkness of her fiction with her real life. She's also protective of her family, who she's in a much better place with: All of them have left the church at this point, though several are still religious in their own ways.

"I always toe the line of not wanting to dredge it up," she says. "But I get so caught up in the fantasy and the fun of making a story that I forget that there are real-world reasons that I do what I do."

WHEN ANHEDÖNIA BEGAN uploading her music online, she connected with musicians like the singer-songwriter Nicole Dollanganger, known for nightmarish-dream pop, and Lil Aaron, a rapper who also grew up in a deeply Christian family. She opened for Dollanganger and gained followers with songs like the gossamer-light "Bruises." Then Lil Aaron introduced her to some people at a publishing company called Prescription Songs. It was the middle of the pandemic, and she says she'd just lost her job doing nails in Tallahassee. The company offered her a deal, and Anhedönia took it – connecting her on paper to Prescription Songs' owner, Dr. Luke, the producer Kesha accused of rape, psychological torment, and emotional abuse in a lawsuit she filed in 2014. (He vehemently denied her claims and countersued for defamation; Kesha's cases were all dropped or dismissed, and this June, after a decade-long court battle, they reached a settlement in which Kesha said that "only God knows what happened that night.")

Anhedönia knew who Dr. Luke was, but she says she wasn't aware of the allegations against him when she first signed. "I didn't do a lot of digging until way further down the line," she says. "I was like, 'Oh.' " Once she knew, she continues, "I just decided, 'I'm here now and can't really go anywhere for a while. So I'm just going to mind my business and make my music.' But if I had my choice, I would much prefer to do business with somebody else. I'll just say that."

The Prescription Songs deal came during a desperate time for her. "I was broke," she says. "I was literally going to the hospital because I was malnourished, and I was passing out all the time. My landlord was sending me angry texts every day because I was behind on rent. I was like, 'I need money,' and I signed."

She emphasizes that she's been in charge of the creative process for everything she's released through Prescription. (Dr. Luke isn't credited on any of her songs.) For now, she's focused on finishing the next few releases she needs to fulfill her contract. "We're almost out," she says. "But yeah, if I could go back in time and do it differently, I probably wouldn't put my name on that paper."

There's a sense in which it's hard to imagine Anhedönia being contained by any music-business paperwork, because of just how expansive her imagination is, and just how much she wants to do. Before Ethel Cain came to her, she'd been sketching out three characters: Teddy, an androgynous altar boy with a vigilante streak; Salem, a woodsy witch with long white hair; and Carter, a time-traveler with a portal in his basement. Then Ethel Cain came along. "I knew it was going to be music, but I was like, 'Can I write a story? Can I make a film? I want to draw this,' " she says. "I'm so obsessed with this story. I want to tell it in a million different ways."

Later this year, she plans to leave Pittsburgh. She's chasing brutal winters to match the tone of her next full-length album, which she describes as dark and cold. It'll focus on the story behind Ethel's mother, and see her grappling with her daughter's death. The one after that will dive into Ethel's grandmother.

There are other characters lurking in her head, waiting to come out – but she still thinks she has a lot of time to spend with the Cain women, and a long time before she reaches the end of the story. "This is going to be 15, 20 years from now," she says. "I work very slow. That's how I like it."

EVE HEWSON

[*Cont. from 14*] she tweeted, after having commented on the article with one single word: "jealous." She was surprised by the overwhelming response to what she had thought was her obviously underwhelming one. "I tweet stupid shit all day long. No one's paid attention," she tells me. "And then all of a sudden it became this huge debate and people were chiming in all these different opinions, and, oh, my God, it was just madness. But it was great promotion for *Bad Sisters*. I mean, the internet is a dark place, but you gotta use these things to your advantage."

Certainly, Hewson is not entitled enough to be confused as to why there should be hubbub around her entitlement. She was in the car with her dad and Bobby Shriver when they came up with the idea for Red. She traveled to Cork to meet the orphans arriving from Belarus as part of her mom's work with the Chernobyl Children's Project. When it came to *Flora,* she knew that there would be those who would question her right to play such a hardscrabble character. "Three days before we started shooting, I almost quit," she tells me. "I was sick with anxiety about it. The conversation that's happening right now about privilege? I understand where it's coming from. I take it seriously."

Hewson explains that despite her privilege, she's endured her fair share of harrowing Hollywood experiences, including a #MeToo episode that caused her to almost quit acting. "Honestly, if I get into it, then I have to call my therapist," she says, declining to name the film. Afterward, she found herself having panic attacks before auditions, and wondering if her body was sabotaging her acting career as a form of self-preservation. A year later, the #MeToo movement happened, bringing with it more interesting roles for women, including Hewson's in *The Luminaries* – "it was similar to what I was going through in my head because she was sort of the object of everyone's desire, and she felt trapped" – and a sense of empowerment that helped her fall in love with acting again. "All of a sudden, people were listening to women. They had access to the media, and social media, and they were able to say, 'This has been my experience. You have to listen to me now.' And that has changed everything on any set. If I have an issue, they better fucking take me seriously. They have to."

If there were any remaining questions about whether Hewson should be taken seriously on her own merits (and there likely weren't), they were put to rest with *Flora,* when the premiere at Sundance received a standing ovation. For her own part, Hewson has come to terms with the fact that her privilege helped jump-start her career, but that it could not possibly be all that has sustained it. "I asked myself a lot of questions, but what I came down to was that I am an actor," she says. "We are playing characters that are unlike ourselves. The actual craft of it is to not know anything about this person's life or their context or their background, and to find a way in to find empathy to then create a true authentic version of that person. I have played prostitutes before. I have played murderers. I have played a man living inside of a woman's body. I've been able to astral project myself and other human beings, you know? I have to just remember what I do."

Plus, it turned out that in some ways, there couldn't have been a better fit for *Flora* than Hewson. The movie's best song is one that she helped write – a skill for which she is more than happy to credit her lineage. "I grew up songwriting," she says, explaining how her dad sometimes had her cut words from a newspaper and use them to create lyrics, Mad Libs-style. "I mean, we were so involved in his work every day. There was music being played, and, 'What do you think of this song? Do you like this verse?' Like, my dad didn't teach me how to ride a bike. He taught me how to write a song." The one she sings with co-star Joseph Gordon-Levitt was written in a Dublin studio in just eight hours and recorded that very night.

Now, with *Flora* set to be released by Apple TV+ in September, Hewson has just returned from Cape Cod, where she'd been working on Netflix's murder-mystery series *The Perfect Couple* until production was shut down by WGA picketers ("I mean, look, I get what they're doing"). Next, she'll head to the U.K. to film *Hedda,* based on Ibsen's play. Immediately after that, she'll film Season Two of *Bad Sisters*. Her schedule is so packed and peripatetic that, she tells me, while she'd love a boyfriend, the prospect feels logistically impossible. "I did start a Hinge account," says Hewson. "The first person that I got matched with is an 85-year-old man. His name was Malcolm. He worked in radio. And he was just looking for an attractive, young, slimmer lady to go on adventures with" – she makes air quotes – " 'when safe, of course.' "

Speaking of safety, a couple of bikers ride past, and Hewson cocks her head to one side. "You know, I still don't know how to ride a bike," she admits. Then she sees the plotting look on my face and bursts out laughing: "No fucking way." ALEX MORRIS

This interview was conducted prior to the actors' strike.

DR. LUKE

[*Cont. from 65*] his big break, the guitarist slot in the *Saturday Night Live* house band. Gottwald kept that job for a decade, and during that time, friends at the hip-hop label Rawkus Records got him started doing remixes of rap records. He also launched a side career as a club DJ, which led him to songwriting legend Max Martin and his colleague Rami Jaffee.

"Either the first or the second thing we did was 'Since U Been Gone,'" Gottwald told ROLLING STONE in 2011. We were listening to the Hives and the Strokes, and Max was like, 'Why can't they just write a hit chorus?' And that's what we did." That's Gottwald's guitar on "Since U Been Gone" – and the opening riff on "Party in the U.S.A." is likely his, too.

Only three years after the Kesha lawsuit, a new Gottwald protégée emerged. In August 2017, Kim Petras released her first single, "I Don't Want It at All," one of many collaborations to come with Gottwald.

One creative director who worked closely with Petras says Gottwald involved himself intimately in her career, "from the music to the visuals to everything. And he's very specific, he's very controlling, but also, he has a lot of experience making pop stars. So he does, in some ways, know what he's doing." For the first time since the lawsuit, Gottwald was back in full Svengali mode.

Petras faced extensive criticism for her work with Gottwald, but kept collaborating with him. She tweeted (and then deleted) in 2022, "5000000 ppl work with him why y'all only coming at me. I have nothing to say or be ashamed of at all. go away." Gottwald is all over her new album, *Feed the Beast*. (A rep for Petras did not respond to a request for comment.)

It was another new artist, signed around 2014, before Kesha's lawsuit hit, who would truly open the door for Gottwald's return. Doja Cat's breakthrough hit, 2019's "Say So," was solely produced by Gottwald, under the alias Tyson Trax. The song was so undeniable that it won Gottwald his first Grammy nominations since 2014. In 2021, Doja told ROLLING STONE she wouldn't work with Gottwald again.

"From the music to the visuals to everything … he's very specific, he's very controlling, but also, he has a lot of experience making pop stars. So he does, in some ways, know what he's doing."

Gottwald also helped pave the way for his return to the mainstream by improving his behavior, the exec says. "You [would] just hear that the guy was impossible to work with and went head to head with the heads of the majors." But, in recent years, he adds, "he's been a really decent guy.… He's been lovely. I'm sure that when things happened, he realized he had to kind of ease it back a bit."

In the world of Prescription, too, Gottwald stays in the background, and lets a crew of personable executives – almost all women – run the company. "They're mostly great people to work with, to be honest," the songwriter says. "They act as a buffer between Luke and the company."

One artist manager says Gottwald's track record of success was enough for some artists to overlook any qualms, even before the settlement. "It's almost like a neighborhood restaurant that is a little bit too expensive, and the service is bad, but some people are still gonna go there," he says. "It's the way I see Luke. Not to take away from all the awful stuff that he's done, but people are gonna go to their favorite restaurant, even if they had a Trump sticker in the window."

It's too early to say whether the settlement of the lawsuit will remove some or all of the stigma of working with Gottwald.

"I would bet you that some people will still not be comfortable working with him," says the successful songwriter. "And I think that there are some people that are fine with it."

The real test of Gottwald's return will be when a truly A-list pop star openly works with him again. His onetime collaborator Katy Perry, for instance, is due for a new album. But no matter what, it's hard to imagine anything or anyone getting Gottwald to stop – at least before he decides it's time. "I really like doing the work," he said in 2011. "And when I don't like doing it anymore, I won't do it."

Additional reporting by Ezra Marcus, Cheyenne Roundtree, and Gavin Edwards.

[*Cont. from 47*] a difference." The next day, Gebru found out she'd been terminated.

Google maintained in a public response that Gebru resigned. Google AI head Jeff Dean acknowledged that the paper "surveyed valid concerns about LLMs," but claimed it "ignored too much relevant research." When asked for comment by ROLLING STONE, a representative pointed to an article from 2020 referencing an internal memo in which the company pledged to investigate Gebru's exit. The results of the investigation were never released, but Dean apologized in 2021 for how Gebru's exit was managed, and the company changed how it handles issues around research, diversity, and employee exits.

It was close to midnight that night when Gebru went public with a tweet: "I was fired … for my email to Brain women and Allies. My corp account has been cutoff. So I've been immediately fired :-)"

Safiya Noble happened to be online. She'd heard about Gebru and the paper. She'd been watching the whole thing from the sidelines from the moment Google announced it was forming an Ethical AI team. In 2018, Noble had written the book *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism,* which looked at how negative biases against women of color are embedded in algorithms.

"I thought, 'This is rich,'" she says. Google suddenly worrying about ethics? Its subsidiary YouTube was the slowest of the major platforms to take action against extremist content. "I was suspicious."

Noble's distrust of these systems started more than a decade ago, back in 2009, when she was getting her Ph.D. in library and information science at the University of Illinois. She watched as Google – which she'd always seen as an advertising tool from her time in the ad industry before pursuing her doctorate – began coming into libraries with giant machines to scan books, making them searchable online for the Google Books digitization project. Noble thought to herself: "They're up to something."

"I started having a hunch that the Google Book project was about training the semantic web technology they were working on," she says, using the term for an effort to make more and more of the internet understandable to (and ingestible by) machines.

Noble's hunch turned into a theory she still holds: The library project was not simply a book project but also a way to gather scannable information to fuel other initiatives. She thinks the data could have later gone on to be used as early training for what would eventually become Google's Bard, the company's LLM that launched this spring. When asked about Noble's theory, a Google spokesperson told ROLLING STONE, "Google's Generative AI models are trained on data from the open web, which can include publicly available web data." The company's report on its PaLM2 model, which was used to train Bard, lists books among the types of data used for training.

Noble's research for *Algorithms of Oppression* started a few years earlier, when she used the search engine to look up activities for her daughter and nieces. When she typed in "Black girls," the results were filled with racist pornography.

"That was like pulling one thread that's poking out of a sweater," she says. "You're like, 'If I could fix this, then I can move on to something else.' But I started pulling it and the whole sweater unraveled; and here I am a decade later, and it's kind of still the same."

Noble and Gebru hadn't crossed paths despite doing similar work – but when Noble saw Gebru's tweet that night about Google, she was struck by how brave it was. She DM'd Gebru, "Are you OK?" From there, a friendship started.

GEOFFREY HINTON – the guy from the front page of the *Times* sounding the alarm on the risks of AI – was nowhere to be seen when his colleague Gebru was fired, she says. (Hinton tells ROLLING STONE he had no interactions with Gebru while he was at Google and decided not to publicly comment on her firing because colleagues he knows well and trusts had conflicting views on the matter.) And when he was asked about that in a recent interview with CNN's Jake Tapper, he said Gebru's ideas "aren't as existentially serious as the idea of these things getting more intelligent than us and taking over." Of course, nobody wants these things to take over. But the impact on real people, the exacerbation of racism and sexism? That is an existential concern.

When asked by ROLLING STONE if he stands by his stance, Hinton says: "I believe that the possibility that digital intelligence will become much smarter than humans and will replace us as the apex intelligence is a more serious threat to humanity than bias and discrimination, even though bias and discrimination are happening now and need to be confronted urgently."

In other words, Hinton maintains that he's more concerned about his hypothetical than the present reality. Rumman Chowdhury, however, took Gebru's concerns seriously, speaking out against the researcher's treatment at Google that winter. And the following spring, Chowdhury was brought on to lead Twitter's own ethics team – META (Machine Learning Ethics, Transparency, and Accountability). The idea was to test Twitter's algorithms to see if they perpetuated biases.

And they did. Twitter's image-cropping algorithm, it turned out, focused more on the faces of white women than the faces of people of color. Then Chowdhury and her team ran a massive-scale, randomized experiment from April 1 to Aug. 15, 2020, looking at a group of nearly 2 million active accounts – and found that the political right was more often amplified in Twitter's algorithm. The effect was strongest in Canada (Liberals 43 percent versus Conservatives 167 percent amplified) and the United Kingdom (Labour 112 percent versus Conservatives 176 percent).

"Who gets to be the arbiter of truth? Who gets to decide what can and cannot be seen?" Chowdhury asks about that experiment. "So at the end of the day, the power of owning and running a social media platform is exactly that. You decide what's important, and that is so dangerous in the wrong hands."

Perhaps not surprisingly, when Elon Musk took over Twitter in 2022, Chowdhury's team was eliminated.

For years, the driving force behind Chowdhury's work has been advocating for transparency. Tech companies, especially those working in and around AI, hold their codes close to the vest. Many leaders at these firms even claim that elements of their AI systems are unknowable – like the inner workings of the human mind, only more novel, more dense. Chowdhury firmly believes this is bullshit. When codes can be picked apart and analyzed by outsiders, the mystery disappears. AIs no longer seem like omniscient beings primed to take over the world; they look more like computers being fed information by humans. And they can be stress-tested and analyzed for biases. LLMs? Once you look closer, it's obvious they're not some machine version of the human brain – they're a sophisticated application of predictive text. "Spicy autocorrect," Chowdhury and her colleagues call it.

Chowdhury founded Humane Intelligence in February, a nonprofit that uses crowdsourcing to hunt for issues in AI systems. In August, with support from the White House, Humane Intelligence co-led a hackathon in which thousands of members of the public tested the guardrails of the eight major large-language-model companies including Anthropic, Google, Hugging Face, NVIDIA, OpenAI, and Stability AI. They looked to figure out the ways the chatbots can be manipulated to cause harm, if they can inadvertently release people's private information, and why they reflect back biased information scraped from the internet. Chowdhury says the most important piece of the puzzle was inviting as diverse a group as possible so they could bring their own perspectives and questions to the exercise.

A person's particular perspective shades what they worry about when it comes to a new technology. The new class of so-called AI Doomers and their fears of a hypothetical mutation of their technology are good examples.

"It is unsurprising that if you look at the race and, generally, gender demographics of Doomer or existentialist people, they look a particular way, they are of a particular income level. Because they don't often suffer structural inequality – they're either wealthy enough to get out of it, or white enough to get out of it, or male enough to get out of it," says Chowdhury. "So for these individuals, they think that the biggest problems in the world are can AI set off a nuclear weapon?"

GARBAGE IN, GARBAGE out. If you feed a machine's learning system bad or biased data – or if you've got a monolithic team building the software – it's bound to churn out skewed results. That's what researchers like Chowdhury, Buolamwini, Noble, and Gebru have been warning about for so long.

Seeta Peña Gangadharan, a London School of Economics professor, has been raising a different set of concerns. She's worried that AI and its derivatives could push marginalized communities even further to the edge – to the point of locking them out.

We all know how annoying it is when you get stuck talking to some automated system when you're returning a pair of jeans or changing a plane ticket. You need a human's help; there's no menu option to get it. Now imagine getting trapped in that same unhelpful loop when you're trying to get welfare benefits, seek housing, apply for a job, or secure a loan. It's clear how the impacts of these systems aren't evenly felt even if all that garbage is cleaned up.

Gangadharan co-founded Our Data Bodies, a nonprofit that examines the impact of data collection on vulnerable populations. In 2018, a member of her team interviewed an older Black woman with the pseudonym Mellow who struggled to find housing through the Coordinated Entry System, which Gangadharan explains functions like a Match.com for the unhoused population of Los Angeles. Caseworkers would add her information to the system and tell her that she was ineligible because of a "vulnerability index" score. After appealing several times to no avail, Mellow cornered a city official at a public event; the official greenlighted a review to get her placed.

"I've been really concerned about the inability of humans generally, but members of marginalized communities specifically, to lose the capacity to refuse or resist or decline the technologies that are handed to them," Gangadharan says.

"So with LLM and generative AI, we have a new, more complex, and more seemingly inevitable technology being thrust in our faces.... Agencies are going to turn to a tool that promises efficiencies and cost savings like AI. Right? They are also sold as tools that will eliminate human bias or human error. These institutions, whether government or private institutions, they're going to rely on these tools more and more. What can end up happening is that certain populations become the guinea pigs of these technologies, or conversely, they become the cheap labor to power these technologies."

NOBLE, GEBRU, BUOLAMWINI, Chowdhury, and Gangadharan have been calling for regulation for years, as soon as they saw the harm automated systems have on marginalized communities and people of color. But now that those harms could extend to the broader population, governments are finally demanding results. And the AI Doomers are stepping in to tackle the problem – even though they stand to make a fortune from it. At least, that's what they want you to think.

President Biden met with some of the AI Doomers in July, and came up with a series of voluntary, nonbinding measures that "seem more symbolic than substantive," *The New York Times* noted. "There is no enforcement mechanism to make sure companies follow these commitments, and many of them reflect precautions that AI companies are already taking." Meanwhile, the Doomers are quietly pushing back against regulations, as *Time* reported Open AI did by lobbying to water down the EU's landmark AI legislation.

"There is such a significant disempowerment narrative in Doomer-ism," Chowdhury says. "The general premise of all of this language is, 'We have not yet built but will build a technology that is so horrible that it can kill us. But clearly, the only people skilled to address this work are us, the very people who have built it, or who will build it.' That is insane."

GEBRU SPENT the months following her Google fiasco dealing with the resulting media storm, hiring lawyers and fending off stalkers. She lost weight from the stress. Handling the fallout became a full-time job.

When it was time to decide what to do next, she knew she didn't want to return to Silicon Valley. Gebru opened the Distributed AI Research institute (DAIR), which focuses on independent, community-driven research into technologies – away from Big Tech's influence. She prioritized recruiting not just researchers but labor organizers and refugee advocates – people she'd "never be able to hire in academia or industry because of all ... the gatekeeping that makes sure these kinds of people don't get to influence the future of technology."

Gebru and her new colleagues focus their research on uncovering and mitigating the harms of current AI systems. One of her research fellows, Meron Estefanos, is an expert in refugee advocacy who looks at the applications of AI on marginalized groups, such as AI-based lie-detection systems the European Border agency Frontex is using with refugees. (The recent EU AI Act does not include protection of refugees, migrants, or asylum seekers.) By interviewing vulnerable communities that have been harmed by AI, DAIR can provide early warnings about what is to come for the greater population once the systems are rolled out more widely. They've reported on exploited workers fueling AI systems, like data laborers in Argentina exposed to disturbing images and violent language while reviewing content flagged as inappropriate by an algorithm.

Noble is on the advisory committee for DAIR and founded her own organization, the Center on Race and Digital Justice, which aims to investigate civil and human rights threats stemming from unregulated technology. She also started an equity fund to support women of color and is publishing a book on the dangers and harms of AI. Chowdhury's hackathon showed the power of transparency and letting diverse voices into the conversation. Buolamwini's Algorithmic Justice League looks at the harms caused by the TSA's expansion of facial-recognition technology to 25 airports across the U.S. Gangadharan is studying surveillance, including AI-enabled, automated tools at Amazon fulfillment centers and its health effects on workers.

There are a few things they all want us to know: AI is not magic. LLMs are not sentient beings, and they won't become sentient. And the problems with these technologies aren't abstractions – they're here now and we need to take them seriously today.

"People's lives are at stake, but not because of some super intelligent system," Buolamwini says, "but because of an overreliance on technical systems. I want people to understand that the harms are real, and that they're present."

This time, let's listen.

LOST CHILDREN OF FOOTBALL

[*Cont. from 71*] discussing Myers' case this past spring. "People with an injured brain have a lower ability to control their impulses. They can be fine one minute and then all of a sudden just pull the trigger or whatever they decide to do. Their judgment is off. There's a situation where something doesn't go well or they become depressed, and they don't have the checks and balances that a person who didn't have an injured brain [would have]. We all get depressed at some point, we all feel lousy, but the injured brain just can't stop it. They can't pull themselves back."

For McKee's team, Wilbourn's grief has become a familiar refrain. "That's really common, in my experience, to have just a random, totally impulsive act that just blindsides the family," McKee says. "That's not uncommon with these suicides."

Then again, she also has encountered plenty of cases in which the suicide is not unexpected. It's the end that some families have been expecting, warding off, fighting back for a long, long time.

AROUND THE TIME of his freshman year of college, Michael Bartlett – the person he was, the person he'd always been – started to disappear. It happened gradually, so slowly that at first it didn't seem like much of anything at all, maybe just a bumpy transition into adulthood. Still, his parents, Larry and Susan, grew concerned: Michael had always been friendly and easygoing, with a smile so big it seemed to hijack his entire, handsome face. On the football field, he'd been the sort of solid kid others looked up to. Now, he seemed to frustrate more easily; now, he seemed a little aloof. A year or so into these changes, Larry and Susan took him for academic testing, hoping to figure out why their smart, quizzical son – the one who'd read philosophy as a child – was struggling so much with college. The results surprised them: They were told that Michael had a very high IQ but very low cognitive function. "She said it was like having a 400 horsepower engine in a car with no wheels," Susan says of the report. "And we're like, 'What does that mean?' "

What it ultimately meant was a decade of misery for her family, a decade of Michael's brain seeming to turn on him. He tried cognitive therapy. He tried antidepressants. He tried taking medication for ADD. When none of that helped, he self-medicated with alcohol. He dropped out of college, moving home to his parents' house in La Mesa, California, isolating himself in his room, fully aware that not just his future but something even more intangible was slipping away. "He knew there was something wrong with his brain," says Susan. "He kept saying, 'There's something wrong. This is my best tool. I cannot lose my brain. I can't.' He tried to figure out what was wrong: 'Maybe I have this, maybe I have that. I don't know what's wrong.' " She doesn't remember him ever mentioning CTE, though the thought may have occurred to him. He'd started playing football when he was nine, coming home so beat up that Susan remembers thinking, " 'You're not going back to that.' That's the stupidest thing I ever saw." But he did go back. By his early twenties, "he started to shut down a lot. I knew we were in terrible trouble, because he would say things like, 'If I can't get my brain right, I can't live.' "

Eventually, it became clear that he didn't intend to. He got a DUI. He tried to hang himself with a belt in his closet. When Michael was arrested for lunging at the gun of one of the cops who'd responded to a suicide call, Larry couldn't help but realize that, mixed in with the hurt and sadness, he also felt a sense of reprieve. "The thing is, he wasn't gonna die in jail, wasn't gonna commit suicide if he stayed there," he says, his voice breaking. Michael never had a girlfriend. He never had a job. Larry and Susan had no idea what to do. There was no family history of mental illness, no indications of past trauma; there was only the constant vigil their life became, trying to keep their son alive. "We had problems leaving the house at all," says Susan. "Because we were always afraid [of what we'd find] when we came home."

When it comes to mental illness, causation is difficult, if not impossible, to prove. Many mental illnesses present in young adulthood – and their causes are certainly multifactorial. But for a number of the scientists who study CTE and brain injury, the multifactorial nature of mental illness – the nature versus nurture of it – is exactly the point. No one can predict their genetic chance of developing a mental illness; no one can predict how those odds might change after hundreds or thousands of blows to the head. "In the concussion clinic that I run, all of our clinicians doing intake evaluations ask, 'Have you ever been diagnosed or worked up for ADD, ADHD, any learning disability, any mood disorder, anxiety, depression, panic attack?' " Cantu says. "The reason that we do this is that whenever you have an underlying challenge to start with, brain injury will only aggravate it." [*Cont. on 80*]

[*Cont. from 79*] This is especially true while the brain is still developing. Though Michael Bartlett never played football past high school, he started at an age when the head is still relatively big compared with the body, and when the muscles of the neck have not been built up, meaning that even minor impacts can snap the head about. At nine, the brain is also less myelinated than it one day will be. "Myelin is the coating of nerve fibers," Cantu explains. "It's like the coating of a telephone wire. It not only improves transmission, but it also makes it a little harder to break, so the same degree of acceleration forces on youngsters' brains can do more damage to the axons than they would do to an adult."

Most importantly, according to Cantu, Bartlett began playing just before a crucial stage of brain development that, he says, occurs between the ages of 10 and 12. In these years, the circuitry is being honed – some connections between nerve cells drop out, and others are enhanced – creating the smoother neural pathways that not only allow for more efficient information processing but also dictate adult personality and intellect. "If you injure the brain during that period of time, you're essentially causing your genetic endowment not to occur, but some aberration of it," says Cantu. "And the aberration is not better."

Nor is it reversible. A 2017 study on 214 former football players found that those who had started tackle football before the age of 12 were twice as likely to have "problems with behavioral regulation, apathy, and executive function" and three times more likely to have "clinically elevated depression scores," even if they never played past high school. Another study from the following year found that participants with CTE who'd started playing tackle football before 12 developed behavioral and mood symptoms 13 years earlier than those who started at 12 or later, a pattern that was also observed in participants without CTE. (Bailes points out, however, that there are some studies that do not replicate these findings.) Younger age of first exposure to a collision sport – one in which contact doesn't just randomly happen but is part of every play in the game – has been associated with structural alterations in the thalamus (even when adjusting for years of play) and in the corpus callosum, the bundle of nerves that connects the brain's two hemispheres. And while damage may not become apparent until early adulthood, when cognitive demands could outpace the brain's diminished capabilities, or may even fly under the radar – how can one measure potential that's lost? – the bottom line, Cantu argues, is that "those who start young will have greater later-life chances to wind up with cognitive, behavioral, and mood issues – and if they get CTE, it'll be worse."

All of which could contribute to an explanation of what happened on July 11, 2019. Just after his 29th birthday, Michael Bartlett drove to an overpass, pulled his car over, climbed up on the concrete wall, and jumped 85 feet to the pavement below. Larry and Susan had been driving around La Mesa, frantically looking for him, when they saw the flashing red lights. "The police wouldn't even let me see him," Larry says. "All they would let me do is hug the body bag. I don't even remember the next two days. It was just like we were in a different world. And it's been that way ever since."

These days, when Susan feels like she's spiraling, she pulls out the report from Boston University, the one that diagnosed Michael with stage 1 CTE. "You know, when you're in a bad place, it's kind of helpful to see the medical answer," she explains. It doesn't change what happened, of course, but it achieves something: It solves the mystery Michael had been so desperate to solve when he was alive. For that, the Bartletts are grateful. "That's where our son exists today, in Boston," says Larry. "That's his contribution to this horrible disease. He contributed his brain."

THE CHICAGO SPRING Reception hosted by the Concussion Legacy Foundation is a cascade of grief amid canapes. One evening this past spring, in a lovely room of the University Club with sweeping views of downtown, family members of the deceased or desperate stand up one by one to share their plight. There is the young son who speaks of his father's decline, the dad who wants to honor his child's memory, the teammate who wonders if his friend's struggles await him also. Toward the end of the impromptu speeches, Jan Callaghan falteringly makes her way to the center of the room. Her son Barrett's legacy story is on the CLF's website, alongside a photo of the football helmet he'd worn in middle school, the one scarred with deep gashes and gouges.

She'd pointed them out the day before, standing over the helmet as it rested on the dining-room table of her house in the Orland Park neighborhood of Chicago. There was a time when those gouges were a source of pride. Now, Jan shudders at the thought.

For years, hers had been a football family, their lives arranged around the endless drills and practices, their weekends spent driving to and from games, their laundry hamper full of grass-stained uniforms. When he was seven, Barrett saw his brother Richie play and begged his parents to find a team for him. Jan remembers getting a call from her husband during one of Barrett's first games: "He said, 'You've got to get up here. You're not going to believe this.' " As she approached the field, she searched out Barrett's little red uniform with the number 3. "And my jaw dropped as I watched him go from one end of the field to the other with the football, never stopping. As a young boy, he was a force. When that football hit his hands, there was no stopping him."

As Barrett got older, it became clear that he'd never play professionally, but it was also clear that football would organize the rhythms of his life. One of his sisters was a cheerleader. His dad, Rich, volunteered as a coach. "The slogan we had was 'Don't drop your bonnet,' " he says the day we meet, sitting at the kitchen table, his voice thick with sorrow. " 'Tackle the right way, into the chest with your face guard up. Don't have your head down.' " Richie had heeded this warning. But Barrett was a different sort of player than his brother, one who made up for his small size with his tenacity. "He was a really tough player," Jan says. "He did play with his head."

There were a lot of tough players on the South Side of Chicago, where the kids attended Catholic school and where football came second to God, if only just. "They call it the black-and-blue South Side Catholic," says Rich. "Because the kids are black and blue." So it was hard to explain to football friends what was happening to Barrett in the final years of his life. People thought he was lazy when he dropped out of college and moved back home, unfocused when he couldn't hold down a job, losing the thread when he'd lash out aggressively for almost no reason. People distanced themselves. Jan would have to remind them, "This is Barrett we're talking about. You've known him forever. Do you think it was normal that he couldn't finish school?" She saw how he couldn't sleep, how embarrassed he was when he couldn't take in simple information or remember simple tasks, how he saw his brother and sisters building lives and careers and families and felt desperately left behind. When he came down to the kitchen one summer afternoon and told Jan he thought he had CTE, she had already come to the same conclusion. She assumed she'd go the rest of her life not knowing for sure. But when state troopers knocked on her door at 4 a.m. the morning of Sept. 26, 2021, and told her that Barrett had died in an accident, a head-on collision with a car going the wrong way on the highway, she had barely been able to even take in the news before she started making plans to have his brain donated.

As with smoking and lung cancer, there's no known threshold for developing CTE and no way to know an individual player's risk factors for being affected by it or other structural changes to the brain – no way to yet explain why some players are ravaged while others seemingly escape harm. On average, those who play a collision sport for less than five years have a very small chance of getting diagnosed with the disease, but the risk goes up after that; at 15 years of play, the risk has been estimated to be 10 times higher. The location of the damage probably matters, too; some parts of the brain are "silent" and harm to them could pass unnoticed, while others are crucial to cognition and regulation of mood. And some people may just take longer to heal, making them more susceptible to outrunning their cognitive reserve. "Probably in some cases, the brain's regulatory systems are not very good – they are more fragile – so the brain cannot bring itself back to normality," says Dr. Lea Grinberg, a neuropathologist who studies the early stages of neurodegenerative disease and whose 2018 study on Alzheimer's found it to also be preceded by mood dysregulation.

Despite these unknowns, the diagnosis of stage 1 CTE has been enlightening, but further isolating for Barrett's family. "This woman whose husband took his life brought up this great point," Jan tells me. "She said, 'Everybody went on and on when he passed about what a hard, tough player he was and a great teammate. And then when I told everybody that he had CTE? Crickets. Nobody wants to talk about it.' " She looks down at her hands spread over the table. "It's like you're on an island," she continues. "I don't know if they just don't believe it, or they don't want their precious little football tarnished." Or maybe, she considers, they just don't want to have to face the possibility that the same fate could await their kid, which is a reservation she understands.

Even Rich had trouble accepting Barrett's diagnosis at first, though time and research have helped him come around. "There's clearly more than a smoking gun here," he says. "The gun's been fired." Jan nods in agreement: "You pay attention, or you don't."

IN RECENT YEARS, plenty of people have paid attention. According to the Sports and Fitness Industry Association, participation in tackle football for kids ages six to 12 has declined almost 29 percent since 2016, the year the NFL first publicly (and belatedly) confirmed a link between football and CTE – which has now also been found in the brains of hockey, soccer, and rugby players, as well as wrestlers, mixed-martial artists, and the first woman, Australian rules footballer Heather Anderson, who died last year at the age of 28 by an apparent suicide. Meanwhile, every state in the nation has passed laws aimed at protecting children who get concussions

playing sports, and helmets have undergone overhauls in pursuit of the perfect padding. U.S.A. Football, which governs the amateur arm of the sport, has promoted "heads up" tackling and concussion training. Pop Warner introduced concussion guidelines in 2010 (including the mandate that anyone suspected of having a concussion must be cleared by a medical professional), banned full-speed head-on blocking and tackling drills in 2012, limited full-contact practices to 25 percent of the time and banned kickoffs (the game's most dangerous play) for athletes under the age of 11 in 2016, and got rid of the three-point stance (which lowers a player's head) in its younger divisions in 2019. (Changes have also been made to youth hockey and soccer.)

Yet many brain scientists and public-health officials question whether some of these changes are having a demonstrable effect, or even an effect at all, when it comes to the most insidious forms of brain injury. Many states' laws tend to deal with managing concussions after they happen, not preventing them. When it comes to helmets, improvements better protect the skull, but they do not stop the brain from ricocheting inside of it, slamming against bone, torquing the brain stem; in fact, the more padding a helmet has – and thus the heavier it is – the more of a weapon it ostensibly becomes. A *British Journal of Sports Medicine* study from 2017 found that new protective equipment had no measurable effect on concussion prevention, much less on the prevention of non- or subconcussive blows. Leagues that use heads-up techniques have actually recorded slightly more concussions (though the increase was statistically insignificant).

According to Cantu and Nowinski, the only changes that demonstrably help are those that reduce contact overall, like the ones Pop Warner has implemented in the face of declining participation. Yet such changes are only as good as their enforcement, and while volunteer coaches may mean well – and may no longer subscribe to the myth that their job is to turn grade-schoolers into gladiators – they may also take false comfort in pronouncements that attempt to undermine the connection between CTE and collision sports and that are sometimes made by organizations with a financial stake in keeping that connection blurry. The International Consensus Conference on Concussion in Sport, an entity responsible for issuing the guidance that informs sports protocols across the globe – and one led by a number of scientists with ties to sports organizations – has consistently published statements that treat the science as unsettled, providing legal cover to conference sponsors like FIFA and World Rugby should they be accused of covering up known risks. In 2016, Pop Warner settled a case brought by the mother of a former player who died by suicide at age 25 and was later found to have CTE, opening the door to other potential lawsuits. ("At Pop Warner, there is nothing more important than the safety of our players, and since 2010, we have led the way in making the game of youth football a safer and better experience than ever before," the organization stated in response to the settlement.)

For whatever reason, there are certainly scientists who tend to focus not on what's known – that exposure to collision sports is the one constant in nearly all documented cases of CTE and that CTE is not the only negative neural outcome – but instead on what's unknown. "Nobody's looking at chess players to see if they die by CTE," says Dr. Michael Lewis, who specializes in preventive medicine and serves on the Pop Warner Youth Football Medical Advisory Board. While Lewis supports the changes Pop Warner has made, he also argues that they are solutions to a problem that may be overstated – or oversimplified by pointing a finger at collision sports. "I mean, I kind of look at it as the climate-change thing. Is the science settled on climate change? I don't think so. But what's the downside of cutting back on carbons? [When it comes to] getting your head hit or whatever, there's no downside to decreasing the exposures. We kind of look at it as, 'OK, the science is anywhere but settled, but let's be conservative and let's limit the amount of contact in practice.' Let me just say, it's not straightforward. It's the brain. It's complicated."

Such a stance puts one of the doctors advising the nation's largest youth-football organization behind not just the NIH but even the NFL in acknowledging the connection between football and CTE. But one need look no further than the American Academy of Pediatrics to see the sway football has had over science. In 1957, the academy advised against collision sports for children ages 12 and younger, concluding that "body-contact sports, particularly tackle football and boxing, are considered to have no place in programs for children [of this age]." Since that time, and even as an abundance of evidence of brain trauma has come to light, the academy's stance has softened. In 2015, the AAP – the same group that recommends against body-checking in hockey in players under the age of 15 due to concussion risk – released a policy statement that essentially sidestepped the issue when it comes to America's most popular game. It conceded that eliminating youth tackle football would "likely lead to a decrease in the incidence of overall injuries, severe injuries, catastrophic injuries, and concussions," but also argued that it would "lead to a fundamental change in the way the game is played."

In light of this trade-off, the AAP, the agency tasked with advising parents and pediatricians about reasonable risk, essentially passed the responsibility for that determination on to them: "Participants in football must decide whether the potential health risks of sustaining these injuries are outweighed by the recreational benefits associated with proper tackling." (When approached about this policy, a representative from the AAP informed ROLLING STONE that it was "currently undergoing an update.")

Thus far, CTE can only be diagnosed postmortem, though this month, Bailes' research team will begin stage three of an FDA trial to diagnose the disease in living people using PET scans and MRIs. This would be a significant breakthrough, not just enabling those with the disease to get early intervention but also allowing for the possibility of treatment. "There's plenty of potential treatments," says McKee. "But it's hard to assess their efficacy without having a biomarker to follow to see if it's getting better. That's part of the problem right now: We can't diagnose it during life, so we can't follow a treatment to see if it's actually beneficial. But I think we're going to get there."

Until then – and in light of not just CTE but other potential cognitive and mental-health outcomes – many doctors and scientists argue that the best approach from a public-health perspective is to outlaw the collision part of collision sports, at least until children's brains have passed the period of rapid development in their tween years. The Concussion Legacy Foundation's "Stop Hitting Kids in the Head" campaign has encouraged parents to hold off on enrolling their kids in tackle football until they are 14. Cantu has called on the surgeon general to ban tackle football for children under that age, pointing out that all of the health and social benefits of a team sport can be retained in less-violent versions of these games (in fact, the Manning brothers famously didn't start playing tackle football until middle school). McKee goes even further, arguing that no one should play a collision sport until they reach the age of consent, until they are emotionally mature enough to weigh the risks themselves and physically mature enough to better withstand them. That may sound extreme to football diehards, but not to McKee, who spends her days looking at damaged brains and speaking to the devastated families who donate them. "Part of the reason I can't let this go is I know what it's doing to people," she tells me. "And I also know it's preventable."

A TEXAS THUNDERSTORM IS brewing, the air growing hot and thick with the smell of the coming rain, on the recent Saturday morning when Letitia Wilbourn visits her son's grave. Under the shade of the oak tree where the doves once perched, she rearranges the plastic flowers and carefully sweeps dust off the gravestone with a little brush she keeps in the car for that purpose. Her daughter Natasha stands there and cries. Wilbourn tries to keep herself busy. "I promised Quan I wouldn't break," she says, walking back to her car. "I told him I will always try to smile when I'm discussing him."

Back home, Wilbourn sits on the floor of her living room, in view of Myers' football trophies, surrounded by his photos, down the hall from the room where his clothes still hang in the closet. The extended family has gathered today, assorted cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandchildren passing through the room and in and out of the house, a tight-knit, boisterous group of which Wilbourn seems to be the calm and stoic center. Life goes on, certainly, even if, in some ways, it now revolves around the memory of death. "If Quan was still here right now, then he probably would be dealing with something mentally in his head," Natasha offers haltingly. "Like, how would he be today? Would he be outside walking around with his shirt off? No shoes? Where would he be?"

Wilbourn's oldest child, Monique, nods. They all know the CTE narrative, the tragic way it unfolds. "What would have been the progression? Would we have to have been looking for him out in the streets?"

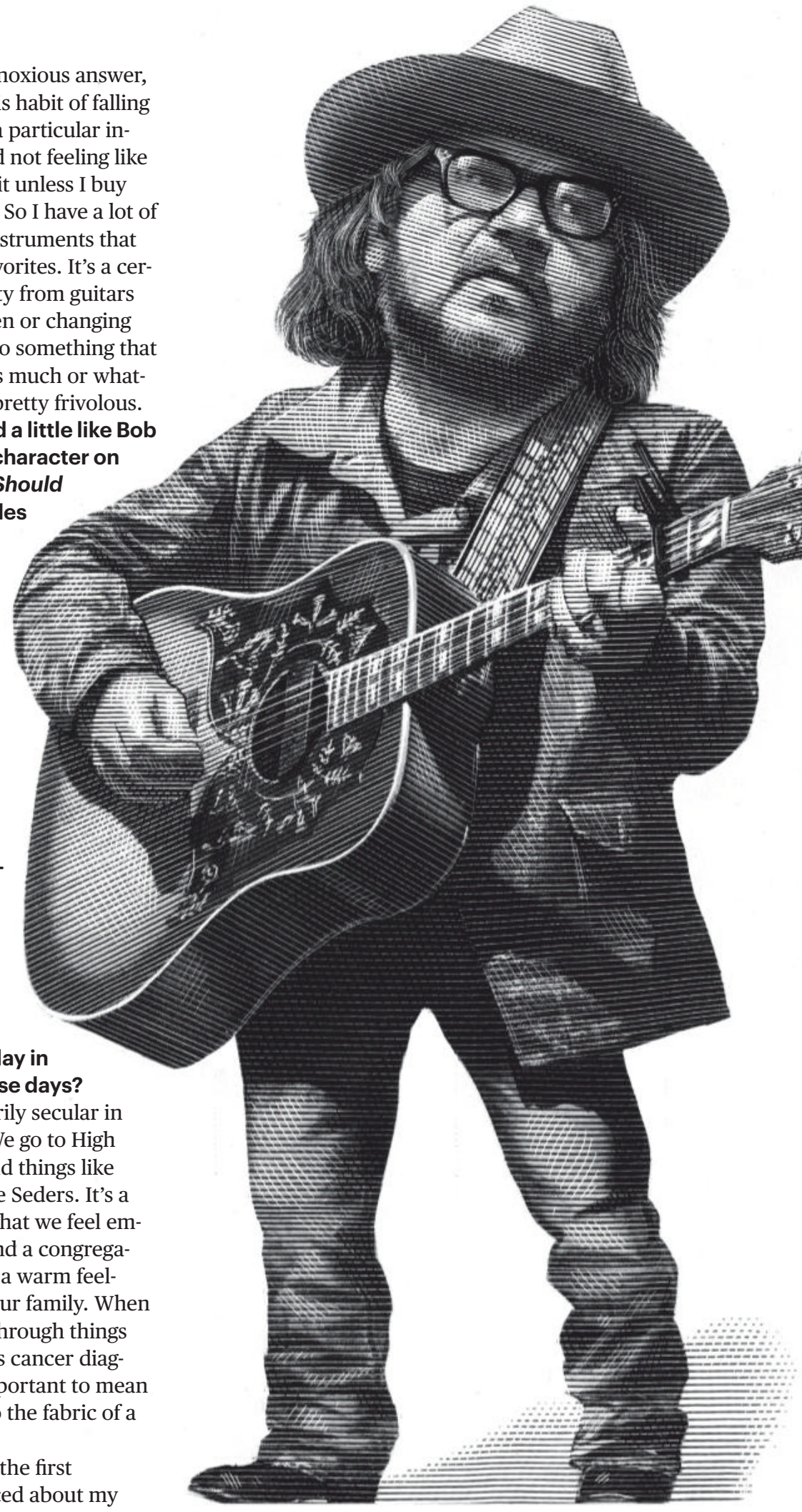
"I don't know if I would be happy seeing him here right now with dementia versus what happened," Natasha says, beginning to cry again. Wilbourn reaches for her daughter's hand. Still, she doesn't break.

There are times when she does. Sometimes, she'll be driving and pass a field with peewee players huddled together, their little helmets and bodies clashing under the Texas sun, and she won't be able to look away. "I pull over and pray for every kid out there," she tells me. "I pray, and I cry." When people ask about her son, she tells them about CTE. She implores parents to consider other sports. She wants her son's death – her own suffering – to have some purpose, some meaning. But, she tells me, "this is Texas, and football is God to some people."

As we're talking, a 12-year-old boy walks into the room and sits silently on the sofa. He's Wilbourn's nephew's child. He started playing tackle football this past year, despite his family's experience with CTE, despite Wilbourn's admonishments, despite the fact that his father sits nervously on the sideline of each game, watching his son's head and the movements of his body, looking for signs of disaster. This very afternoon, the boy is a witness to his family's grief, yet it won't stop him from playing this game of neural Russian roulette. What can Wilbourn do? He isn't her child. All she can do is pray that maybe, just maybe, this is a game he'll win.

Jeff Tweedy

On expensive guitars, listening to new music, Judaism, and staying sober



What is the best piece of advice anyone has given you?
Early on, we were touring with the Band. It was the *Arkansas Traveler* tour with Michelle Shocked and Uncle Tupelo. I was rehearsing, and Rick Danko stepped up on-stage behind me, out of the blue, and said, "You sound desperate. You should always sound desperate. Don't lose that." It's a weird way of saying something that I totally agree with. I think what he really meant is people have to hear that you care – that you're desperate to communicate, desperate to connect. That's why we sing.

Wilco's 13th studio album, 'Cousin,' will be released on Sept. 29.

In your new book, *World Within a Song*, you write about all kinds of new music that you love, from Billie Eilish to Rosalía. How have you kept your ears so open to new artists?
Even if it wasn't something I'm naturally curious about, I think it's the most important part of what I do. I want to feed the part of me that gets excited by something unpredictable. I mean, I would've killed for this scenario when I was a kid, that I could just dial up anything I was reading about and hear what it sounded like immediately. So it's a way of honoring that kid in me.

What's the most extravagant purchase you've ever made?
This is an obnoxious answer, but I have this habit of falling in love with a particular instrument and not feeling like I really have it unless I buy another one. So I have a lot of doubles of instruments that are all my favorites. It's a certain insecurity from guitars getting broken or changing over time into something that I don't like as much or whatever. That's pretty frivolous.

You sound a little like Bob Odenkirk's character on *I Think You Should Leave*: "Triples is best."
Exactly. That's me. I think I've got triples of the '68 Gibson Dove.

You were skeptical of religion growing up, but you converted to Judaism as an adult. What role does Jewish tradition and belief play in your life these days?
We're primarily secular in our family. We go to High Holy Days and things like that. We have Seders. It's a community that we feel embraced by, and a congregation that has a warm feeling to it for our family. When we've gone through things like my wife's cancer diagnosis, it's important to mean something to the fabric of a community.

It's one of the first things I noticed about my wife's relationship with other people, especially when she ran a rock club. Anybody that was a Jewish person in a rock band that came through, automatically, they had a comfort level, and they could actually sing the same prayers. I was thinking, "What do I have like that? The *Gilligan's Island* theme song?"

You've been in recovery for almost 20 years, since you went to rehab for an addiction to opioids in 2004. How much do you have to think about that these days?
It's a daily thing. It's not something you want to lose sight of. It's not as intense; the feeling of being on a ledge has gone away considerably over the years. At this point, right now, I'm in an enormous amount of pain because I have really bad osteoarthritis in my hips, and I count my blessings every day that this isn't the period in my life where I'm going to be introduced to opioids and find out how much power they have over me – and maybe not make it. I feel really, really fortunate to know what I'm up against.

You suggest in the book that Stevie Wonder should write a new national anthem to replace *The Star-Spangled Banner*. That's a great idea, but why not you?
[*Laughs.*] Well, who would you rather have write it: Me or Stevie Wonder?

SIMON VOZICK-LEVINSON

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